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ROBERT BROWNING

BY

ARTHUR WAUGH



BOSTON
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PREFACE.

This brief Life of Browning is a miniature, not a panel portrait. Many of the qualities which a larger canvas might secure are, necessarily, lost to it ; but, within the limits of a miniature, it seeks at least clearness and colour.

It would be difficult to enumerate all the books that have been gratefully consulted by the writer, since he has tried to make himself acquainted with most of what has been written of Robert Browning. The foremost debt is, naturally, owed to Mrs. Sutherland Orr, the next to the “Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.” The bibliography at the end of the volume gives some idea of the chief among other obligations.

Apart from these, the writer has endeavoured to give a picture, not only of the man, but of his surroundings, and to indicate concisely, but definitely, the relation in which Browning stood to the literary movements of his time.

But the primary object of the book is, of course, to lead the reader to the Poems themselves. We use a rushlight in the shadow; but, when once we are in the sun, we can see the world's beauty for ourselves.

A. W.

HAMPSTEAD, CHRISTMAS, 1899.

CHRONOLOGY.

1812

May 7. Robert Browning born.

1822-26 (about)

Browning at Mr. Ready's School, Camberwell.

1826

Browning studying at home under a private tutor.

1830

Attended Greek lectures at London University.

1833

Pauline published. Browning travelled in Russia.

1834

Contributions to *Monthly Repository*, edited by W. J. Fox.

1835

Paracelsus published. The Brownings moved to Hatcham.

November 27. Browning met Macready.

December 31. Browning met Forster (at Macready's).

1836

Macready commissioned *Strafford*.

1837

May 1. Strafford produced at Covent Garden, and published.

1838

Browning travelled on the Continent.

1840

Sordello published.

1841

Pippa Passes published (Bells and Pomegranates, I.).

1842

King Victor and King Charles published (Bells and Pomegranates, II.). *Dramatic Lyrics* (Bells and Pomegranates, III.).

1843

The Return of the Druses (Bells and Pomegranates, IV.).

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon published (Bells and Pomegranates, V.) and produced at Drury Lane.

1844

Browning travelled in Italy. *Colombe's Birthday* published (Bells and Pomegranates, VI.). Elizabeth Barrett's *Poems* published.

1845

Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (Bells and Pomegranates, VII.). Browning met Elizabeth Barrett.

1846

Luria and *A Soul's Tragedy* published (Bells and Pomegranates, VIII.).
September 12. Browning and Elizabeth Barrett married.

1847-49

The Brownings in Florence and Italy.

1849

March 9. Browning's son born.

1850

Christmas Eve and Easter Day published.

1851

Casa Guidi Windows published.

1852

Browning's Introductory Preface to Shelley's Letters published.

1855

Men and Women published.

1856

Aurora Leigh published.

1860

Poems before Congress published.

1861

June 29. Elizabeth Barrett Browning died.

Browning removed to London (Warwick Crescent).

1864

Dramatis Personæ published.

1868

The Ring and the Book published.

1871

Balaustion's Adventure published, also *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*.

1872

Fifine at the Fair published.

1873

Red Cotton Night-cap Country published.

1875

Aristophanes' Apology and *The Inn Album* published.

1876

Pacchiarotto and Other Poems published.

1877

Translation of the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus published.

1878

La Saisiaz and *The Two Poets of Croisic* published.

1879

Dramatic Idyls (first series) published.
Browning received degree of LL.D. at
Cambridge.

1880

Dramatic Idyls (second series) published.

1882

Browning received degree of D.C.L. at
Oxford.

ROBERT BROWNING.

I.

EXCEPT a man have history at his finger-tips, a date, taken by itself, is apt to be cold and unsuggestive. One reads and repeats glibly that Robert Browning was born upon the 7th of May, 1812; but nowadays, when tastes and fashions pass so quickly, one needs something more than a collocation of figures to carry the imagination back over an interval of nearly ninety years. Still, books are, fortunately, of longer life than fashions; and, when we try to recall the literary atmosphere of the past, the horizon lightens at once. On the May morning when the little house in Camberwell was happy for the birth of a first-born, the first part of Byron's *Childe Harold*, published three months before, was still the talk of the town. While the future author of *Paracelsus*

was not yet a year old, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* made its first appearance at the booksellers', after nearly twenty years of wandering among neglectful publishers; Crabbe published his *Tales in Verse*; James and Horace Smith, their *Rejected Addresses*; Heber's *Poems and Translations* were first collected into a volume; and Samuel Rogers's *Poems* were lying hot from the press on every drawing-room table. At that time Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Sir Walter Scott were all between forty and fifty years old. Lamb was thirty-seven. *The Curse of Kehama* was a comparatively new book, and the *Quarterly Review* had issued but thirteen numbers. Among those whose names were to be great in literature, Tennyson was not three years old, Thackeray but a few months, Dickens even fewer, and Elizabeth Barrett herself, if we take the Coxhoe date as authoritative, had just passed her sixth birthday. These, it is

true, are only a few among many of the names of the period ; but they give a certain atmosphere. They carry us back to a different London,—to what one may almost call a remote Camberwell, full of gardens and glades, acacia-trees, and the song of birds.

It was in Southampton Street, Camberwell, that Robert Browning was born, the first child of his parents. His father, after whom the son was named, bore in turn the same name as *his* father. The poet's grandfather, as various testimonies agree, was an able, vigorous man of business. At the time of the poet's birth he had risen to a position of authority in the Bank of England, where he had worked assiduously for forty-three years. He was now over sixty, had married a second wife, who had given him a large family, and who was a somewhat hard ruler at home. He was well-to-do, however, and, except for the gout, had few anxieties. The poet's

father had been less fortunate. The stepmother had proved a burden. She objected to the son of the first wife enjoying any privilege which was likely to be denied to her own children. She had prevented him from going to the university, and may have had something to do with the father's peremptory refusal, when the boy begged to be trained as an artist. At any rate, he, too, was sent into the bank, married a Miss Wiedemann in 1811, settled in Camberwell, and a year later became the father of the third and great Robert Browning, the poet.

The traditions of a hard boyhood are apt to descend from father to son. We are all inclined to mete out to others the measure which we have ourselves received. But Robert Browning's father was of humaner spirit. A kinder or more thoughtful parent has rarely existed ; and it was by his genial influence, as Mrs. Orr points out, that the child's

early inclination for poetry was fostered. The father had a great gift for verse-making, and used to teach the boy hard facts, and even Latin declensions, by the use of a rhyming *memoria technica*. He was, moreover, an excellent reader, and fond of reading aloud to his children. A better training for certain elementary aspects of a poetical temperament it would be difficult to imagine.

It is not uninteresting, when we reflect how closely Browning and Tennyson were to be allied in later life, and how pre-eminently the two names stand out in the poetry of their generation, to contrast the early associations of the two children. It is told of Tennyson, as every one now knows, that, when he was yet in frocks, he ran down the shady garden path at Somersby, carried along by the spring gale, and crying, "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind." This, it has often been remarked, was his first line of poetry. It is also re-

corded of Browning that, while he was yet so short that his hands could only just reach the edge of the table, he used to march round it, shouting out metrical lines, and emphasising the measure with the movement of his hands. The two stories point the contrast in themselves. And a little later, while Tennyson was roaming at will about Holywell Glen, reading his favourite classics in the open air, the young Browning was trudging to and from London University, along noisy, crowded streets, with Dulwich Wood on a holiday for his wildest country. It is scarcely strange that talents so differently fostered should have found their first issues, the one in a love so pre-eminently akin to nature, the other in a sympathy so peculiarly human. The first associations of Tennyson were leaves and brooks ; but, from the beginning, Browning's life was centred among men and women.

In one thing the boys' fortunes were

allied : each found in his mother a kind and homely influence. Not much is recorded of Browning's mother, but all that is told of her speaks of true maternity. She was musical ; and from her the poet derived that love of music, which, though it is not always implicit in his verse, was invariably an influence in his life. Moreover, she was poignantly religious ; and, as a boy, Browning took his spiritual inspiration entirely from her. His home life was so happy that, when first he went to school as a weekly boarder, the separation was almost more than the child could bear.

The school, which was in the neighbourhood, was kept by the Rev. Thomas Ready, whose sisters superintended a preparatory department, to which Robert was at first admitted. It does not appear that his school-days were of more than ordinary effect in his education. He learnt there the usual accomplishments, but the books that he especially

loved were the books which he found at home. Of these Mrs. Orr gives a very interesting list. Among the favourites were Quarles's *Emblems*, of which his father possessed a seventeenth-century edition, often pored over by the boy, and even scrawled upon in crude, wandering characters. He was particularly fond of history, and read the *Letters of Junius* and the works of Voltaire while yet a boy. For poetry he had Milton and Byron ; and, like the young Tennyson, he fell immediately under the spell of the latter. His early verses, like the *Poems by Two Brothers*, were full of Byronic imitation. Nor were these merely disconnected essays in verse ; for, by the time he was twelve, he had actually produced a volume of poems, for which there was some idea, or even, as Mrs. Orr seems to imply, some direct attempt, to find a publisher. The scheme fell through, however ; and the young poet was left, as was best, to

write for the few private friends to whom he showed his manuscripts. No doubt it is always the case that certain poetic impulses pass, like waves, across the country, overwhelming, as it were, all the young minds that they encounter. Still, it is unusually interesting to find Browning, like Tennyson, passing from the influence of Byron directly to that of Shelley. Mr. William Sharp, in his monograph in the Great Writers series, relates that it was the sight of a volume on a bookstall, labelled "Mr. Shelley's Atheistical Poem: Very Scarce," that first aroused Browning's curiosity concerning a poet of whom he then knew nothing. He at once begged his mother to get him a complete set of Shelley's works, which, with some difficulty, she succeeded in doing. Their influence upon him was instantaneous; and for the next few years Shelley was the one poet of his affections. Nor was Browning the man to drift from an allegiance once

given. For Shelley he always retained an undiminished admiration; while of Byron he wrote in the year of his marriage : —

I always retained my first feeling for Byron in many respects. . . . I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves, I am sure; while Heaven knows that I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room, if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were condensed into the little china bottle yonder, after the Rosicrucian fashion!

While he was undergoing these poetic influences, Robert Browning left Mr. Ready's school, and settled down at home under a private tutor. His studies were many-sided; but poetry, as was inevitable, absorbed his keenest energies. As time went on, it became more and more evident that his ambitions were tending solely in the one direction. Various professions, among which diplomacy was most attractive to him, were suggested, only to be dropped; and,

shortly after he had begun to attend lectures at University College, he was encouraged to discuss with his father the idea of embracing literature as a career. He seems to have entered upon it with no extravagant expectations of recompense, but at the same time without any harassing apprehension. Years afterward, in writing to Elizabeth Barrett, he gave a very intimate reflection of the prospects with which he set out : —

My whole scheme of life [he said] (with its wants, material wants at least, closely cut down) was long ago calculated; and it supposed *you* — the finding such an one as you — utterly impossible, because, in calculating, one goes upon *chances*, not on providence. How could I expect you? So for my own future way in the world I have always refused to care.

It is probable, too, that the poet's father, having himself been thwarted in the course of life upon which he had set his heart, was not the man to place ob-

stacles in the way of his son's better fortune. At any rate, before he was twenty, Robert Browning was devoted to the literary life, and hard at work at the poem which he afterward described as "the little book I first printed as a boy,"—the little book of which John Stuart Mill wrote, "The writer possesses a deeper self-consciousness than I ever knew in a sane human being."

Mill was in part right and in part wrong; for the Browning of that first "little book" was a Browning who had been reading Shelley for months as a prelude to original poetry, and much of the self-consciousness was, in a sense, imitative or dramatic. But the book itself was *Pauline*, and its publication was the first-fruits of a poetic genius that will live as long as the English language.

II.

ALTHOUGH Browning did not lack that moderate measure of self-confidence which is necessary to artistic activity, he seems to have been somewhat diffident when it came to the printing of his first finished volume. For, though he knew that his parents were full of sympathy and interest, it was to his aunt that he first confided his ambition ; and it was she — good, kindly lady — who promised to provide the money required for publication. Saunders and Otley undertook the task of publishers ; and Browning's benefactress paid a bill for some forty pounds for the slim volume of seventy pages, of which few copies are now known to survive. Years afterward, when Browning heard of the sale of a copy at one of those fancy prices dear to the bibliophile, he wished that his aunt had been living to see that a single copy

of the once neglected "little book" was now worth a sum very little less than the whole edition had originally cost to print and bind. *Habent sua fata libelli!* *Pauline* was published in January, 1833, a month later than Tennyson's volume of *Poems* which bears the same date. The year of its appearance was of more than common interest to English literature. It saw the *Last Essays of Elia* collected from the *London Magazine*, and with them the close of Lamb's gentle and humane career. Within the same twelve months *Fraser* began to print Carlyle's wonderful *Sartor Resartus*. In September Arthur Hallam died; and Tennyson, overwhelmed by grief, entered upon his ten years' silence. Moreover, while *Pauline* was still fresh upon Otley's shelves, Elizabeth Barrett published her *Translation of Prometheus Bound*, so that the names of the three poets who were to render Victorian poetry illustrious come together in the

bibliography at the outset. Viewed in the perspective of nearly seventy years, 1833 seems a year of great events and greater promises.

At the time, however, no citadel was carried by storm ; and *Pauline* made but a quiet appearance in the arena. The most conspicuous notice it received was, indeed, the result of a friendship already established. It will be remembered that, at the age of twelve, Browning had completed a manuscript of verse, which had been handed about among the friends of his family. Among the most "influential" of these was W. J. Fox, the Unitarian minister, a man of quick literary perception and a very genial capacity for praising promise. He had spoken well of the verses ; and Browning, having now something more definite to show him, hastened to submit a copy of *Pauline* to his criticism. The letter which accompanied the parcel is amusingly boyish, both in its rather stilted protestation of

modesty (from which a certain confidence may yet be seen peeping), and in its naïve confession that the author sends the volume, "having either heard or dreamed that you contribute to the *Westminster*." But Fox was man enough to feel for the boy, and kindly critic enough to write a very eulogistic notice for the *Monthly Repository*, of which he was editor. "The poem," he said, "laid hold of us with the power, the sensation of which has never yet failed us as a test of genius."

In later years Browning expressed a quite disproportionate distaste for this first literary bantling of his. Every one knows the preface of 1867, in which he declares that he preserves the poem under protest and to forestall the printing of uncorrected transcripts, adding that "good draughtsmanship and right handling were at that time far beyond the artist." Readers of his letters to Elizabeth Barrett will also remember

with how much hesitation and delay he excuses himself from sending her a copy of the poem. . . . "Will you and must you have *Pauline*? If I could pray you to revoke that decision. For it is altogether foolish and *not* boy-like. It is unluckily *precocious*," and so forth with much reiteration. Critics, however, have rightly agreed to see more in the "crab of the shapely Tree of Life in his *Fool's Paradise*" than the poet could himself discern; and *Pauline* remains interesting and valuable for many reasons. It is no part of this little sketch to be minutely analytic; but it will be at once apparent to the careful student, as it was to Fox, that *Pauline* could only be the first step in a career of genius. It is by no means typically Browningsque, for the tendency to splendour and colour, which Fox noticed with apprehension, was to fade out with the fading influence of Shelley; but it was at once suggestive of Browning's future strength, in being

"one of those utterances of imaginary persons, not mine," which were to develop in time into the dramatic fulness of *The Ring and the Book*. Its principal interest, however, is not so much dramatic as personal. When Mill remarked upon the deep self-consciousness of the writer, he touched perhaps nearer to truth than he knew; for there are passages in it that are confessedly autobiographical, and that give us, more clearly than all the analysis of all the Browning societies, a glimpse into the character of the Browning of the time.

I am made up of an intensest life,
Of a most clear idea of consciousness
Of self, distinct from all its qualities,
From all affections, passions, feelings, powers;
And thus far it exists, if tracked, in all:
But linked, in me, to self-supremacy,
Existing as a centre to all things,
Most potent to create and rule and call
Upon all things to minister to it;
And to a principle of restlessness
Which would be all, have, see, know, taste,
feel, all—

This is myself ; and I should thus have been
Though gifted lower than the meanest soul.

He goes on to say that this grasp upon the sensuous faculties, this restlessness for knowledge, is transfigured in him by imagination, which

Has been a very angel, coming not
In fitful visions, but beside me ever
And never failing me; so, though my mind
Forgets not, not a shred of life forgets,
Yet I can take a secret pride in calling
The dark past up to quell it regally.

Added to these, and beckoning him, is
the lode-star lighted in him by his
mother's love,

A need, a trust, a yearning after God:

... I saw God everywhere;
And I can only lay it to the fruit
Of a sad after-time that I could doubt
Even his being—e'en the while I felt
His presence, never acted from myself,
Still trusted in a hand to lead me through
All danger; and this feeling ever fought
Against my weakest reason and resolve.

Inquiry into a man's religious belief is

apt to degenerate into an impertinence, but so much is here definitely said by Browning himself that it may not be out of place to say a little more, towards the better understanding of the man, no less than of the poet.

Baptized at an Independent Chapel, and brought up among devout surroundings, the boy Browning was pre-eminently religious with the easy orthodoxy of childhood. His mother's gift of Shelley's poetry seems to have had a somewhat disturbing influence. It was then that doubt was first presented to his mind in a tangible form; and a natural reaction followed. It is to this period that the passage in *Pauline* refers. Mrs. Orr tells us that, in the first years of manhood, Browning showed a tendency to become assertive and wayward. Increasing knowledge and the sense of talent in him grew restless under restraint, and the things that had pleased him pleased him no more. The mood

passed,—passed more quickly in him than in most. It left him with a settled confidence in immortality and in the continuity of spiritual activity, but the follower of no hard-and-fast sect or doctrine. “The truth,” his wife wrote to him a few weeks before their marriage,—

the truth, as God sees it, must be something so different from these opinions about truth, these systems which fit different classes of men like their coats, and wear brown at their elbows always! . . . I believe in what is divine, and floats at highest in all these different theologies. . . . I could pray anywhere,—with all sorts of worshippers, from the Sistine Chapel to Mr. Fox’s, those kneeling and those standing.

To which Browning replies :—

I know your very meaning in what you say of religion, and responded to it with my whole soul. What you express now is for us both. Those are my feelings, my convictions beside,—instinct confirmed by reason.

This much by way of digression, that we may go forward with some sort of idea of Browning’s attitude to life at the

moment of his first entry upon the literary stage. No doubt the mere sense of performance, the daily interest of work maturing, of self realised, would do much to dissipate the restlessness that so often accompanies unwilling inaction. The man with the sense in him of things to do, and the torment of the inability to do them, is never happy or at one with himself. From henceforth Browning was to be always active, always strenuous.

There were other reviews of *Pauline*, but of no great importance. The book, naturally enough, did not sell. At a time when Tennyson, though "popular at Cambridge," as Moxon with unconscious humour remarked, had still a public of no more than three hundred purchasers, it was hardly likely that Browning, with no university friends to help him, would be popular in the common sense. In the year of his marriage he had still a whole "bale of sheets" of *Pauline*, stowed away at the top of the

house. But the publication of the book attracted attention to its author in a smaller circle, and may have been indirectly responsible for an invitation from Mr. Benckhausen, the Russian consul-general, in consequence of which Browning, in the winter after that of *Pauline*, spent three months of activity in St. Petersburg. His letters describing his visit were unfortunately lost ; but the careful student of verse will not need to be reminded that what he saw in Russia has, in more than one of his poems, touched his descriptions with actuality.

He returned to London, and settled down again to poetry. Some isolated lyrics (one of them now enshrined in *Pippa Passes*) were printed in Mr. Fox's *Repository* ; but the greater part of his time was given to the preparation of a highly ambitious poem, the subject of which had been suggested to him by his friend, the Count Amédée de Ripert-Monclar. This young Frenchman was,

Mrs. Orr tells us, staying in England as a private agent of communication between the royal exiles and their friends in France ; and he and Browning, having many tastes in common, became firm friends. He was an artist, too, and painted an excellent portrait of the poet. The idea for *Paracelsus* was given to Browning in the early autumn after his return from Russia ; and he must have worked hard, for by the middle of April the manuscript was complete, and offered to a publisher. Mr. Moxon declined to bring it out, although Browning's father was ready to pay the cost of publication ; and, after failing to come to terms with the publishers of *Pauline*, the poet at last intrusted the manuscript to Mr. Effingham Wilson, who had a considerable following of poets. Fox was a friend of Wilson's, and, having been in the poet's confidence throughout his business transactions, seems to have helped in persuading the publisher to

undertake *Paracelsus*. Indeed, it should never be forgotten that Browning owed almost all his early encouragement to Fox's warm yet judicious friendship. The letters which passed between them at this anxious period of the poet's career show that Fox was the first to whom Browning turned instinctively for criticism and advice.

With the publication of *Paracelsus*, however, the field of his acquaintance was to be enlarged. At first the book fell flat. Talfourd's *Ion* was among the new books of the season ; and Browning could not help feeling somewhat aggrieved, not only by the fact that Talfourd enjoyed columns of praise to his own lines of condemnation, but, as he afterwards put it, with a touch of humour, that

in the same column often would follow a most laudatory notice of an Elementary French book, on a new plan, which I "*did*" for my old French master, and he published. *That* was really an useful work.

The *Athenæum* gave to *Paracelsus* but three lines, “not without talent, but spoiled by obscurity and only an imitation of Shelley” ; and the flock of little papers followed the lead, until Browning and his publisher scarcely knew whether to laugh or weep at the unanimity of the verdicts pasted in Wilson’s book of *Press Notices*. Fox, it is true, was once more friendly. But his notice in the *Monthly Repository* was one upon which the poet, knowing his view beforehand, could always depend ; and the combined condemnation of all the unknown critics was beginning to discourage him. Then one morning there appeared in the *Examiner* a discriminating, judicial review of *Paracelsus*, mingling praise and blame, but treating the work from the highest standpoint, and pronouncing it, after all that criticism could say, to be a work of brilliant promise and real power. This review, so clearly unbiassed and unprompted, at

once introduced the book to the wider public,—so far as the public that cares for pure literature can ever be described as wide ; and a copy of *Paracelsus* found its way to the shaded room of a delicate young lady, who read eagerly every new volume of reputable poetry and had herself already given promise of uncommon performance. She read it, and felt at once that it was “the expression of a new mind” ; and she differed from the common herd of literary amateurs in that she did not share their galling preference for *Ion*. The lady was Elizabeth Barrett ; and the critic who first gave Browning conspicuous praise in a literary journal of the first grade was John Forster, then as utterly unknown to him as his own future wife, but henceforth to be one of his most trusted and valued friends.

III.

It was, however, before he met Forster that Browning made an acquaintance which was to exercise a predominant influence over the next few years of his life. On the 27th of November, 1835, Macready was dining in Bayswater with Browning's "literary father," W. J. Fox; and the poet was asked to "drop in" after dinner. It was, in many senses, a psychological moment for such a meeting. Macready was in a very unsettled and dissatisfied state of mind. During the spring of that year he had taken an expensive travelling company, of whom he expected much, into the West of England, and had played to very poor houses with a depressing effect upon his exchequer. On his return to London, he had joined Alfred Bunn's company at Drury Lane for the winter season, and had played

during October several of his favourite parts, including Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, and Hotspur, but again without influencing the returns of the box office so largely as Bunn had hoped. A drama by Planché was tried as an experiment; and Macready, who had retained a veto upon the parts he was to play, declined to appear in it. By the law of contraries the new piece proved a prodigious success, and Macready found himself shelved. He was, of course, paid his salary; but he was "out of the bill," and there is no doubt that the situation annoyed him. It was just the time when he would be looking out for a man of talent to write him a play worthy of his powers; and he and Browning could scarcely have met under more favourable circumstances. It is at least certain that the meeting was cordial. Browning was just beginning to feel his feet, and his general address was extremely prepossessing. Enough of the

boyish confidence remained to give him ease and spirit in conversation, while at the same time he had matured in manner and bearing. His appearance, moreover, was highly in his favour. He dressed well, was dark, slender, and handsome; and Macready noted in his diary that his "face was full of intelligence." They parted with mutual promises for an early meeting; and Browning at once sent his new friend a copy of *Paracelsus*. Within a very few days Macready found time to read it, and his admiration for the writer was increased.

A work of great daring, starred with poetry of thought, feeling, and diction, but occasionally obscure. The writer can scarcely fail to be a leading spirit of his time.

Such was the criticism confided to the actor's diary. A few weeks later Browning was invited to see the old year out at Macready's place at Elstree.

When the North London Coach was

making ready at the "Blue Posts" on that New Year's Eve, two young men among the waiting passengers passed and repassed each other on the pavement, stamping out the cold in exercise. Each suspected that the other might be going to the Elstree party; but, with characteristic British reticence, neither spoke until the two were introduced in the lighted drawing-room. Then they found that they were already known and grateful to one another; for one was Browning, and the other Forster. They were exactly of an age; and, by way of cementing the introduction, Forster remarked, "Did you see a little notice of you I wrote in the *Examiner*?" He could scarcely have brought a better claim to the poet's gratitude, for the *Examiner* review had been the most helpful that Browning had yet received. Little wonder that the poet felt among friends, and that he "won opinions from all present" by his bright and enthusiastic talk of men and books.

This evening must have been set in golden letters in Browning's calendar, but it by no means stood alone. For, although *Paracelsus* was not a publishers' success, it served to make his name known in the inner circles of men of letters. About this time the Browning family moved to Hatcham, where other relatives joined them; and in one house and another Browning's name began to be familiar. He met Richard Hengist Horne, Leigh Hunt, Bryan Waller Procter, Monckton Milnes, Talfourd, and many others, and upon one of his visits to Elstree was introduced to Euphrasia Fanny Haworth, the Eye-bright of *Sordello*, who became one of his dearest friends, and to whom he used to turn for criticism and advice in the portrayal of his female characters.

Whether Macready at once suggested to Browning that he should write him a play is not clear, but it is fairly certain that the idea had formed itself vaguely

in the poet's mind long before any actual arrangement was made. Within a few weeks of the evening at Elstree, Browning and Forster called on the great actor, and the conversation turned upon the stage. Planché's *Jewess* had had its run; and Macready was on the boards again, starting in February with *Othello*. Browning had been to Drury Lane to see him, and was so much impressed that he could not rest until he had told his friend of his admiration. Then, in the course of talk, he mentioned a drama which he himself had in mind,—a tragedy, *Narses*, which in the whirligig of fortune came to nothing. But Macready was pleased with the idea, and it worked in his mind to some purpose.

Meanwhile things came to a head at Drury Lane. Enraged by what he considered Bunn's slighting treatment of him, Macready—on a night in April when he had been obliged to play three acts of *Richard III.* as the first part of

a sort of variety programme — dashed from the stage in an itching fury, and, seeing Bunn's office door open, incontinently thrashed him on the spot. It was a squalid fight, unfortunately, and ended in the law courts ; but it had the effect of transferring Macready to Covent Garden and Osbaldiston's management, where for the first time he was associated with Miss Helen Faucit, the partner of his greatest successes, and the leading lady in the dramas which Browning was to write for him. It was there that on the 26th of May, 1836, the author's birthday, Talfourd's *Ion* was produced with complete success ; and that evening was to seal the connection between Macready and Browning. There was a party afterwards at Talfourd's, a memorable gathering. Macready sat between Wordsworth and Landor, with Browning opposite. Miss Ellen Tree, who had that evening played Clemanthe with approbation, was of the company, besides

Forster, Clarkson Stanfield, and Miss Mitford. Macready was (in his own words) "tranquilly happy." The host proposed the toast of the English poets, and to the surprise of the company, whose eyes naturally turned to Wordsworth, called for a response from "Mr. Robert Browning, the youngest of our poets." It must have been a nervous moment; but Browning came through it admirably, "with grace and modesty." As they were descending the stairs, Macready detained Browning for a moment. "Write me a play," he said, "and keep me from going to America." The poet was ready with a suggestion. "What do you say to *Strafford*?" he replied. And so began a co-operation, chequered, indeed, and not without its misfortunes, but of the first importance to the development of Browning's genius. When one remembers the feeling of not unworthy irritation with which he had watched the critics' praise of *Ion* a few

months before, it is not uninteresting to reflect that it was upon the occasion of its theatrical birthday that Browning himself received this first great compliment, which was to be so fruitful of consequences in his own career.

He began work upon the drama almost at once, setting aside *Sordello*, upon which he was some way advanced. The history of the play was already familiar to him, as he had been helping Forster in a biographical sketch of Wentworth for Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopædia*. By the following March the drama was finished, and Macready was delighted with it. He put it in rehearsal for his benefit upon May Day, and everything seemed to be progressing fortunately. Unluckily, Osbaldiston's stock company was a very poor one. Apart from the stars, Macready and Miss Helen Faucit, it was composed of hack actors, ignorant beyond belief, several of whom seemed to be incapable of getting Browning's mean-

ing drummed into them. As the evening of performance drew near, Macready began to lose confidence ; and, indeed, the performance was certainly bad enough to destroy its chances. Browning himself was fairly satisfied with Mr. Vandenhof's Pym ; but the *Examiner* thought him "positively nauseous, whining, drawling, and slouching." Young Vane was a "whimpering school-boy" ; and, as for the king, his performance was merely execrable. Despite every drawback, however, the play was a complete success. It was withdrawn on the fifth night, owing to Mr. Vandenhof leaving the company ; but, so long as it was played, it met with general approbation. Macready and Helen Faucit acted splendidly, and their spirit seems to have carried the piece against the retarding dulness of the rank and file. Browning had no cause to be dissatisfied with his first acquaintance with the stage.

Strafford was published as a book by Longmans simultaneously with its performance ; and it is pleasant to find that the first copy upon which Browning could lay hands was sent, on the very day of performance, to his old friend, Fox. Encouraged, no doubt, by the fact that the play was to be performed so conspicuously, the publishers took it up at their own expense ; but the enterprise was unremunerative. Meanwhile Browning resumed his interrupted task of *Sordello*. He worked at it through the winter and into the spring ; and then, feeling the need of the southern atmosphere to give colour to the poem, he determined to carry it off, and finish it in Italy. So with the sunshine he sailed for Trieste, the only passenger on a merchant vessel. On the way out they had a strange adventure, sighting a wreck which proved to be a smuggler, with a crew of dead bodies, drowned beside their booty. The ship had been floating

keel upwards for a month under a blazing sun. Besides this grisly encounter and a heavy storm in the Bay, little happened on the outward journey; but, before they reached Trieste, Browning had written "How they brought the Good News" and "Home Thoughts from the Sea," with its picture of the Gibraltar which he was carried upon the deck to look at.

Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;
In the dimmest North-east distance dawned Gibraltar grand and grey.

From Trieste he went to Venice, then to Asolo, back to Venice, and thence by Verona and the Tyrol to Frankfort and Mayence, and home by the Rhine and Antwerp. With so many places to see it is not surprising that he should have done very little towards finishing *Sordello*. It was indeed practically untouched when he returned to London, and was not ready for a publisher till

more than a year later. This time the trade would not support him sufficiently to take risk, and the book was again published at his kindly father's charges.

It is not unlikely that the broken fashion in which *Sordello* was worked upon was to a great degree responsible for the inherent difficulties of the poem. It is obvious that work sustained at full course must naturally have more unity than work taken up at intervals, and that a joined thread has less strength than a virgin one. Certainly, one of the acutest criticisms of *Sordello* is Mrs. Browning's own : —

It is like a noble picture with its face to the wall or at least in shadow. . . . It wants drawing together and fortifying in the connections and associations, which hang as loosely every here and there as those in a dream, and confound the reader who persists in thinking himself awake.

This loose hanging of associations is precisely what we should expect in work that was frequently interrupted, and it

is not without interest that Browning should have often had it in his mind to reconstruct portions of the poem and reconnect its interests. Still, from the point of view of the student of poetic development, it is more satisfactory to have the poem as it stood at first. It marks, indeed, the final step in the first stage of Browning's intellectual growth. Like *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, it is the study of an aspiring soul ; and it has in common with both the fact that it is clearly not without autobiographical touches.

Browning himself, as every dramatic poet both before and after him has found cause to do, expressly deprecated the reading of personal sentiment into what was essentially impersonal analysis. But the character of Aprile in *Paracelsus* is clearly a reflection of his own aspirations ; and, indeed, he is understood to have accepted the implication.

I would speak [says Aprile]; no thought which
ever stirred

A human breast should be untold; all passions,
All soft emotions, from the turbulent stir
Within a heart fed with desires like mine,
To the last comfort shutting the tired lids
Of him who sleeps the sultry noon away
Beneath the tent-tree by the wayside well;
And this in language as the need should be,
Now poured at once forth in a burning flow,
Now piled up in a grand array of words.
This done, to perfect and consummate all,
Even as a luminous haze links star to star,
I would supply all chasms with music, breathing
Mysterious motions of the soul, no way
To be defined save in strange melodies.

This is clearly, as so much else in the poem, a forecast of the line upon which Browning was steering his course. And in *Sordello* we already get the dawning of a sense of the necessity of selection. At first the poet was for portraying every emotion; but, after a first survey, he begins to understand the helplessness and, indeed, the unprofitableness of so comprehensive a scheme.

A crowd,—he meant
To take the whole of it; each part's intent

Concerned him therefore; and, the more he
 pried,
 The less became Sordello satisfied. . . .

Made these the mankind he once raved about?
 Because a few of them were notable,
 Should all be figured worthy note?

There are many such passages, familiar to the student, which are of the highest interest, but for which space is unfortunately lacking to an analysis here. They show, not only with how keen and sincere an aspiration Browning adopted the literary life, but also how intimately he associated himself with these earlier creatures of his fancy. The poetic soul was naturally the first to attract a poet's analysis; and *Sordello* is, in a certain sense, an enlargement upon the character of Aprile in *Paracelsus*. But in *Sordello* the poet has become more dramatic and less personal. With maturity he is acquiring more and more the power of assuming a cast of thought alien to his own. The idea of intellectual and spir-

itual growth is almost always present in Browning's dramatic poems; but with *Sordello*, as more than one critic has noticed, we emerge from the self-conscious stage of Browning's imagination, and his attitude to life becomes altogether more altruistic. No doubt, the practice in formal drama had helped to this; and so the intervention of *Strafford* between portions of *Sordello* had more than an external effect upon Browning's work. In writing directly for the stage, he had perforce to assume a deliberately dramatic spirit. Introspection was practically debarred, and the necessity for action and movement became paramount. The result is immediately apparent in *Pippa Passes*, the next piece of work to engage the poet's attention. Here the dramatic touch is at once stronger, keener, more vital, than in any of the earlier poems. Here the subtle sense of motive and effect begins to move like a spirit on the face of the waters.

Here, in a word, Browning begins to realise his power. It was, in truth, a crucial moment in the poet's career when he first encountered the actor's influence.

IV.

“*Sordello*” was the last poem for whose publication Browning was indebted to his father’s unfailing generosity. No doubt, the poet, since he was always sensitive about such things, was anxious to shift for himself. At any rate, when he came to turn over a number of poems which lay in his desk, he determined to do the best he could for them on his own behalf. The sequel has been told, with characteristic picturesqueness, by Mr. Edmund Gosse. Browning went to discuss the matter with Moxon; and the publisher told him he was bringing out an edition of some of the Elizabethan dramatists in a cheap form, and that, if Browning cared to print his poems as pamphlets, using the type Moxon was employing, the cost would be inconsiderable. The poet was pleased with the idea; and it was agreed that each poem

or issue should consist of a sheet of sixteen pages, in double column, the entire cost of which should not be more than fifteen pounds. Such was the beginning of *Bells and Pomegranates*, which appeared in eight numbers, between 1841 and 1846. The first was *Pippa Passes*; the second (1842), *King Victor and King Charles*; the third, in the same year, *Dramatic Lyrics*; the fourth, *The Return of the Druses* (1843); the fifth, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* (1843); the sixth, *Colombe's Birthday* (1844); the seventh, *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845); the last, *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy*, published in the year of Browning's marriage, 1846. *Pippa Passes* was originally priced at sixpence; but, as the sale was small, it was increased to a shilling, and eventually rested at half a crown, which was the price of each subsequent number. In this fashion, so humble outwardly, a "perfect treasury of fine poetry," as Mr. Gosse well calls

it, was presented to the public. The title was explained by Browning himself:—

The Rabbis make Bells and Pomegranates symbolical of Pleasure and Profit, the Gay and the Grave, the Poetry and the Prose, Singing and Sermonising.

He chose the symbolical phrase as being less pretentious than any formal explanation; but in the last number, in deference to the suggestion of his wife, he printed an explanatory note. The original edition of *Pippa Passes* had also a preface, which serves to emphasise the hint made in the last chapter, that the dramatic intensity of this new burst of poetry was largely due to his experience in writing for the stage:—

Two or three years ago [it ran] I wrote a play, about which the chief matter I much care to recollect at present is that a Pit-full of good-natured people applauded it. Ever since, I have been desirous of doing something in the same way that should better reward their attention. What follows I mean for the first of a

series of Dramatical Pieces, to come out at intervals; and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear will for once help me to a sort of Pit-audience again.

This promise is definite enough, and the result is even more so. With this incomparable series Browning established himself in his mature manner, in the dramatic portrayal of "so many imaginary characters" not his own, which has rendered him by far the subtlest artist in motive that has ever written in English, save only Shakespeare.

In the meanwhile Macready had not forgotten him, and was anxious for another play. The great actor had been experiencing various vicissitudes. Weary of the cramping restraint of Bunns and Osbaldistons, he had gone into management on his own account, and had been moving from the Haymarket to Covent Garden, and thence to Drury Lane, with varying degrees of success. In the spring of 1842 he was at

the Haymarket ; and while there he accepted for production during his next season *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, which Browning had just written, designedly for him. In the autumn Macready moved to Drury Lane, and, in order to make an unusual display for the winter season, engaged Mrs. Nisbett, the popular comic actress, together with Charles Mathews and Madame Vestris. Unfortunately, the combination failed ; and, by the time that Macready was ready to bring out Browning's play, the season had involved him in serious pecuniary embarrassments. Had he told Browning the facts frankly, a great deal of trouble would have been saved. But Macready was always abnormally sensitive ; and, instead of a straightforward statement, he wrote to Browning that, of the two plays which were by arrangement to precede his, *The Patrician's Daughter* had been unsuccessful, and *Plighted Troth* had "smashed his arrangements altogether," but that

he was still prepared to produce Browning's *Blot in the 'Scutcheon* in accordance with his agreement. Undoubtedly, Macready hoped that Browning would appreciate a hint, and withdraw; but the poet, in his own words, "had no notion that it was a proper thing, in such a case, to release him from his promise," and the actor found himself obliged in courtesy to go forward. He then appears to have lost his temper and judgment altogether. He caused the piece to be read to the company by the prompter, Mr. Willmott, an elderly gentleman of somewhat comic appearance, who so mangled the lines that some of the actors laughed. Macready then sent for Browning, and told him that his piece had been ridiculed by the company engaged to play it, and yet, when Browning expostulated, confessed the circumstances of the reading, and promised to read it to the actors next day himself. However, having so far made amends,

he attempted yet another device to get Browning to withdraw the play. He declared that, under the pressure of management, he was unable to play Tresham himself, and that Phelps must act instead. Again Browning failed to take the hint. Phelps was ill, and could only sit in a chair at rehearsal, while Macready read the part. Apparently, the manager liked the play better after this trial; for Phelps, stopping Browning at the stage door, assured him in a broken voice that Macready meant to play the part after all, that of course he himself could not ask Browning to give up such an advantage, but that he was prepared to study the part all night, if the poet cared to have him play it. Thereupon Browning returned to Macready's room, and cried abruptly, "I beg your pardon, sir; but you have given the part to Mr. Phelps, and I am satisfied that he shall act it." This was two days before the performance (February

11, 1843) ; and Phelps had but one clear day to rehearse. The result of all this unfortunate vacillation was that Macready let the representation drift in its own way. No new scenery was painted, no new dresses bought : the piece was literally thrown upon the stage. Yet once again, in spite of every hindering element, Browning's dramatic reputation was avenged by the issue. Phelps, ill as he was, proved better than his word, and played the part of Tresham very finely. And of Helen Faucit's *Mildred* Browning himself wrote with the utmost enthusiasm, sending her at the same time a copy of verses for her album, of which the following lines are a striking memento of an unfortunate occasion : —

Helen Faucit, you have twice
Proved my Bird of Paradise.
He who would my wits inveigle
Into boasting him my eagle,
Turns out very like a Raven:
Fly off, Blacky, to your haven.

But *you*, softest Dove, must never
Leave me, as he does for ever.
I will strain my eyes to blindness
Ere lose sight of you and kindness.

There is no doubt, too, that her tact and woman's wit had much to do with smoothing matters over in the almost disorganised company. She was a true friend to Browning in this trying crisis, and he in his turn was extremely considerate and amiable with the actors. In the result the piece, difficult and estranging as some of its taste undoubtedly is, went well with the audience, and was enthusiastically received. It was only played three times, but its premature removal was not improbably due to Macready's disaffection. It was nearly twenty years before he and Browning spoke together again.

The story of this incident, pitiable as it is in many of its aspects, has been told at some length (with the aid of Mrs. Orr and Mr. William Archer), because

there is no doubt that it had a considerable influence upon Browning himself. First and last, it separated him altogether from the theatre. *Colombe's Birthday*, it is true, was performed ten years later at the Haymarket ; and during the last years of his life Browning saw both *Strafford* and the ill-fated *Blot in the 'Scutcheon* not unworthily performed by amateurs. But after his misunderstanding with Macready he ceased to write directly for the stage. It is an ambition that every poet feels at some period of his career. Nowadays, when the pecuniary rewards of a dramatic success are so considerable, the glitter of the footlights is more than ever tempting. With Browning the claim asserted itself early, and passed early away. How far he would ever have succeeded as a popular stage poet is problematic. In that glaring light, fustian shows better than gossamer ; and the stage has commonly preferred its Sheridan Knowleses to its

Brownings. At any rate, Browning for his part had no further traffic with "the boards." His experience there served him in excellent stead, not only in the field of ethics, but of art; yet he never desired ardently to return to it. The stage had cost him one of his dearest friends, and he was happy to have done with it.

V.

THE stage production of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, whatever its indirect influence, was merely an episode. The real heart of Browning's activity during the first six years of the forties is centred, of course, in *Bells and Pomegranates*. And, since these little yellow pamphlets contained much that will always rank with the best of his poetry, it is not without interest to notice how ripe was the time for a poetic début. In the history of Victorian poetry these were indeed years of the very first significance. Great poetical outbursts invariably move in cycles. There are wildernesses of what appears to be literary stagnation or paralysis, and then suddenly the desert blossoms like a rose. This was precisely the case at the time which we are considering. During the first twenty or thirty years of Browning's life, poetry

had been languishing. After the somewhat dreary *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* of 1822, *Yarrow Revisited* (in 1835) was Wordsworth's only important publication. Crabbe died in 1832; and, though Coleridge lived till two years later, he had already been inactive for a decade. Moore had found his lyric spring exhausted, and Southey was devoting the last years of his life almost exclusively to prose. Suddenly, in 1842, Tennyson, who had published nothing for ten years, took the public gaze again. His two volumes of poems came at the very moment when they were needed, and their success was immediate. Within a few months of their publication a university debating society was discussing the question that "Alfred Tennyson is the greatest poet of the age," and the whole of England was reading "Ulysses" and the "Dream of Fair Women." An appearance of this kind is never isolated. When poetry is in the air, poets are

ready for the hour. The recognition of Tennyson was followed at once by a burst of rivalry, some deliberate, some unconscious. In the former class must be placed the feverish activity of Elizabeth Barrett, who at once set about arranging a two-volume edition of *Poems*, recasting old pieces and designing new ones with all the spasmodic energy of the invalid. To the latter, no doubt, we must ascribe the calm, even production of Robert Browning, who had already sketched out his own "programme," but who was unquestionably sustained in its performance by the general interest in poetry that was seething in Tennyson's wake. Various occasions, of course, helped to various ends. The "Pied Piper," immortal favourite with children of every age, was written to amuse Macready's little boy, who was ill in bed, and wanted a poem to draw pictures to. "The Flight of the Duchess," with six others, was given to Tom

Hood for his *Magazine*,—a graceful assistance to a friend who was himself past work. But, whatever the occasion, the course of Browning's labours was impelled by it, not diverted. It was always a characteristic of his work that he never allowed considerations from outside to interfere with its order. Editors sought him in vain. He would not put aside, for the chances of the most brilliant advertisement, work which he had planned beforehand. He was one of the most conscientious artists that ever laboured with the quill.

During this period of almost ceaseless literary activity, Browning seems to have worked with all the painstaking that was at the disposal of a naturally careful artist. Under inspiration he wrote rapidly, but the labour of elaboration and finish was long and thoughtful. The mere exercise of writing was not, as it is with many men of letters, a pleasure to him : he never opened his desk,

he said, without a sigh, nor closed it without a smile. But his desire for performance overcame all petty inconveniences. Above all things, he wrote for *himself*, and for the satisfaction of his own sense of art. It is clear from his letters that he was quite contented with the amount of reputation which his work had so far brought him. For a wide circulation, in a vulgar sense, he had very little care. With all his interest in the mental attitude of the ordinary man,—and that interest is continually apparent,—he had, nevertheless, a thoroughly good-natured contempt for the judgment of “that rather narrow-toned organ, the modern Englishman.” If the public had bought his poems, he would have had use for the money. Meanwhile he was far more interested in the verdict of those whose opinion was worth attention. Criticism which appreciated his intention stimulated him ; but, if it was unintelligent or un-

sympathetic, he was not greatly depressed. He could never understand, he said, why Keats or Tennyson should "go softly all their days" for the sake of an unkind reviewer. Still less could he approve of a poet modelling himself, against his better instincts, to suit the wit of blundering criticism. His friends at this time were principally men of letters, and such women — a very few — as showed literary tendencies. In a word, his life was bound up in literature.

It chanced, however, that some three years or so before the time we are immediately considering he had made a friend who was to bring a new and absorbing interest into his life.

He was dining, Mrs. Orr tells us, at Talfourd's, when an elderly gentleman came up to him, and asked if his father had ever been at school at Cheshunt. Browning remembered that that was the case ; and his new acquaintance rejoined,

“Then ask him if he remembers John Kenyon.” The question was put next morning, and the elder Browning recalled his old acquaintance at once. The two met, and a broken friendship was renewed with interest. John Kenyon was one of the kindest of men. He was genial, unselfish, and of a fine, manly aspect. Browning nicknamed him “The Magnificent.” He was particularly fond of young people, and had a true sympathy with literary aspiration. Among the dearest of his friends was his distant cousin, Elizabeth Barrett, the poet. To her from her earliest years he was, as she herself said,

unspeakably my friend and helper, and my books’ friend and helper, critic and sympathiser, true friend of all hours.

She was, as every one knows, an invalid, and so peculiarly dependent upon her friends. Kenyon was one of her most frequent visitors, and it was his pleasure to bring with him any new friend whom

he thought she would like to see in her enforced solitude. Shortly after he had made the acquaintance of Robert Browning, he suggested taking him to Gloucester Place, where the Barretts were then living. They even went to the door; but she was still too ill to see them, and by some chance negligence the opportunity was not at once repeated. Meanwhile Elizabeth Barrett passed through a great trouble, which marks also, as it happens, a crisis in her whole career. Her favourite brother was lost at sea under circumstances of peculiar poignancy.

He was far the dearest to her of all her family, and she had been extremely ill. It was found necessary to send her to Torquay for the winter; and this brother, Edward, took her there, with the intention of returning to town at once. But, when it became necessary to part from him, she was so much overcome with grief that they were obliged

to get him to remain. He stayed with her for months, during which she was in perpetual danger of death. Then, just as she seemed to be recovering, the little boat in which he was sailing was mysteriously lost; and she never saw him again. With the peculiar sensitiveness which was characteristic of her, she blamed herself for the catastrophe. Her father had much wished the brother to return to London; and she felt now that, if he had gone, the misfortune of their lives might have been avoided. She was at once plunged into the deepest distress, in which the kindly affection of her father — and this must always be remembered in palliation of any later doubts — was her only comfort. However, she overcame her trouble in time; and with her mastery of it she seemed to have gained strength of every kind but physical. Her poetry emerged from its first imitative immaturity, and she began to be recognised as one of the fore-

most writers of her day. She was read, first by the few who care for literature, then by the wider public both in England and America. She was established as a favourite; enjoyed the confidence of critics; her opinions and advice were sought by some of the best-known men of her time. As a woman, her position was unique. By virtue of her sympathy and intellectual vivacity, she queened it from her sick-room over the literary fashions of London and New York.

Such was the position of Elizabeth Barrett, when Browning, at the close of 1844, returned from a short tour in Italy to find her new *Poems* the poetic success of the season. He naturally hastened to read the book, and among the pieces found one which had, as a matter of fact, been written at full speed to fill an empty sheet, but in which he could hardly have failed to be pleased by the occurrence of his own name :—

There, obedient to her praying, did I read aloud
the poems

Made to Tuscan flutes, or instruments more
various of our own ;

Read the pastoral parts of Spenser, or the subtle
overflowings

Found in Petrarch's sonnets—here's the book,
the leaf is folded down !

Or at times a modern volume, Wordsworth's
solemn-thoughted idyll,

Howitt's ballad - verse, or Tennyson's en-
chanted reverie,—

Or from Browning some "Pomegranate," which,
if cut deep down the middle,

Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a
veined humanity.

Browning was indeed delighted with
the whole work. Meeting his friend
Kenyon while still full of the subject, he
expressed his admiration generously.

"Why don't you write and tell her
so?" said Kenyon. "She is an invalid,
and sympathy is a great help to her."

Browning went home, and took Kenyon's
advice ; and so began one of the most
idyllic stories in all the history of love.

VI.

THE letter which Browning wrote, at Kenyon's suggestion, to Elizabeth Barrett (January 10, 1845), was of precisely the kind to strike fire from a nature full of the yearning for sympathy. With no preamble of introduction or excuse, it broke at once into the topic of admiration. "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett,"—these were the first words to greet her eye. The letter went on to say that he had meant to give himself the pleasure of analysing and justifying his enjoyment in her poetry,—even, perhaps, of criticising a little,—but that, when he sat down to write to her, he found it impossible to do more than express again and again his sincere affection for her work. Finally, he told her how Kenyon had once tried to bring them together; but "the half-opened door shut, and the sight was

never to be." The letter was not long, but it was so full of evident sincerity that it must have seemed more eloquent than columns of conventional praise. Elizabeth Barrett was cordially delighted with it, replied at twice the length, begging for the criticism which he had withheld, and hinting that the meeting, which had been prevented, was, perhaps, only deferred. Her letter in turn invited an answer, and the correspondence between them was started upon lines that seemed to wander into perpetuity. Within three weeks of Browning's first letter they had agreed to "sign and seal a contract" of friendship, to write to one another without constraint or ceremony, and to discuss every topic that might find itself upon the paper with an entire absence of conventionality or pretence.

If it be true that the surest partnerships are those between friends whose qualities supply one another's deficien-

cies, then the alliance between these two poets might be said to have promised richly from the first. Their lives had hitherto afforded a perfect contrast. Always delicate from the time when, at the age of fourteen, she was thrown from her pony, Elizabeth Barrett had spent her early girlhood at the foot of the Malvern Hills, with fewer friends than books. There she had built up for herself an artificial religion of classic gods and goddesses, and as a child had even offered little secret sacrifices to Minerva in hidden corners of the garden. She lost her mother early, and was thrown more and more upon her own resources. Among her earliest studies had been Tom Paine, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Out of these she had constructed a sort of half-pagan, half-Christian philosophy. When the family removed to London, she had indeed enlarged her field of vision, and had not altogether lacked

the company of men and women. But the society of a sick-room is necessarily cribbed and confined ; and in the hours of her serious illness, when she thought that she was never likely to recover, it was borne in upon her with every access of regret that she had been spending her life on literary culture, when she ought to have spent it in the study of mankind, and that she really knew very little of her fellow men and women. With Browning it was precisely the reverse. As Kenyon often remarked, what seemed the super-subtlety of his poetry was in direct contrast with the open, practical nature of his social intercourse. Outside his study he was essentially a man of the world. Indeed, he was particularly fond of society ; and, while his days were laboriously devoted to poetry, his evenings were freely given to dinners, receptions, dances, and all the ordinary routine of a London season. His view of life was also eminently

practical, his attitude to the problems it presented reasoned and logical. He was as far as possible from the "head-long" spirit in which his new friend plunged into fresh relations and literary enterprises. Each of them may well have found in the other the qualities most stimulating to mutual respect and affection; and it is not surprising that their correspondence ripened from day to day, and became more and more necessary to their existence.

Their confidences began at once to range over every field of their interests. Of their own work, their methods, their aspirations, their attitude to criticism, and so forth, they naturally wrote much. But these considerations introduced many lesser ones, till they were soon diving into every by-path of life and literature. Now it was a question of calligraphy,—was a large handwriting better than a small one,—now some difficult passage from *Æschylus*,—how

it should best be rendered. Then, again, they would discuss the advantages of social intercourse, the value of fiction and romance, the privileges of travel, the companionship of animals; and every here and there would be jotted down some little anecdote or amusing touch of character, so that, in reading the letters to-day, one is actually transported into the very atmosphere of early Victorian life and literature. And through all these early letters there runs one perpetual topic,—the return of spring, which is to bring her renewed health and enable the two to meet.

It was not till the 20th of May that they first met face to face. Then, after many postponements and hesitations, the “shut door” was at last opened; and for an hour and a half of the sunny afternoon they talked as they had written, of a thousand various interests. From the moment that they had met it

is natural that their correspondence should become more intimate. There was, indeed, a momentary misunderstanding. She, with possibly a touch of the "headlong" impetuosity which was so characteristic, was apparently responsible; but he, interpreting her meaning with rare delicacy and allowance, smoothed things over, and, with the exception that one letter was burnt, the correspondence continued unaffected. He had now seen her and her surroundings; and henceforth the names of her family appear frequently in the letters, and he is able to take a larger share in the smaller incidents of her life. Moreover, they continued to meet, sometimes once, sometimes twice a week; and the friendship rapidly developed into a deeper sentiment.

It is, of course, impossible, within the space at our disposal, to dig very deeply into the rich mine of their confidences; nor is it, perhaps, desirable. As their

affection became more intimate, much was said on either side that is best read in their own words alone : the sensitive reader may even experience a feeling of intrusion in being permitted to know so much of the secrets of their love. But, in order to understand the course of events, certain incidents, now common to history, must be noticed.

As the autumn grew near, it was thought that Elizabeth Barrett ought to be sent to winter abroad. Pisa was suggested, also Alexandria, also Malta. Her brothers seem to have been anxious that she should go. Her favourite sister, Arabel, was willing to accompany her. But her father was firm in his opposition. Removed as we are now from the circumstances of the time, and obscured as many of the issues have become, it is difficult to judge fairly of the ground of his determination. Moreover, there are still those living to whom any discussion of the matter must be pain-

ful; and it is desirable to speak with every consideration and restraint. But the question has been much discussed; and it would certainly seem that Mr. Barrett, the elder, has been generally misjudged. He was "a father of the old school," as the phrase runs; and he claimed, as fathers commonly did claim half a century ago, a strong hand over his children. He seems to have believed that his daughter's ailments were largely neurotic, and that, if she exercised her will-power more strenuously, she might be very much stronger. He used to grumble at her dinner of dry toast, and exclaim that, if she had lived all her life upon porter and steaks, she would have been as well as other girls. No doubt he thought the scheme of travelling abroad unnecessary, and held it his duty as a father to withstand it. For he was clearly very fond of his daughter: he used to visit her sick-room every night, and offer her the best consolation that

was in his power. The days of paternal government are over now, and we have begun to understand that a father may be something better than an autocrat. But fifty years ago the autocracy of the arm-chair was the rule of the household, and it is doubtful whether Mr. Barrett was very different from other fathers of his time. At any rate, the autumn passed ; and it was decided that the invalid was to stay in Wimpole Street. At first, it was a bitter disappointment ; but she soon saw, as Browning told her, that it was her duty to him and to herself to face the situation and the winter winds bravely, and to preserve her health for the spring and its possibilities. For they were now definitely engaged, although the engagement was kept a secret. To Browning this secrecy was galling. His natural frankness and sense of honour rebelled against it. But she assured him that it was necessary, not only to her present peace, but

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she felt he must do as he pleased; but, for her own money, it was hers, and she would never consent to "put away from her God's gifts, given perhaps in order to this very end." And, even if the diplomatic post were secured, it might separate them. She could not, for example, accompany him to the cold of Russia. So the scheme, so honourable to Browning in its conception, fell through; and the summer passed in plans and counter-plans.

With the autumn matters came to a head. It became again clear that the winter ought to be spent abroad, but again there was the same opposition. Suggestions were made for a compromise,—Dover, Reigate, Tunbridge. But Elizabeth Barrett was now determined that another winter in England was more than she could endure, and that, if she was not to go abroad as Edward Barrett's daughter, she would do so as Robert Browning's wife. When

at last her brother was sent to Reigate to look out for a house, she felt that the former contingency was hopeless. On the morning of Saturday, September 12, 1846, she walked with her maid from her father's house in Wimpole Street to the nearest cab-stand, and was driven to the Church of St. Marylebone, where she and Browning were married at eleven o'clock. When she stepped from the house, she was so weak that they had to go to a chemist for sal-volatile; but her courage and confidence carried her through what must have been, for one so delicate, a really terrible ordeal. Yet, in her own beautiful words,—

I thought that of the many, many women who have stood where I stood, and to the same end, not one of them all perhaps, not one perhaps, since that building was a church, has had reasons strong as mine for an absolute trust and devotion towards the man she married,— not one!

At the church door they parted, and Robert Browning noted on the envelope

of the last letter which she wrote him before their marriage that this was their ninety-first meeting. When next they met, they were never again to be parted in life.

She drove to Hugh Stuart Boyd's, and thence after lunch to Hampstead, passing on the way the church of so many new memories. It was, in every respect, one of the strangest wedding days. But Browning felt that the strain of the occasion was as much as his wife could bear at the moment, and that to start upon a journey immediately would be in the last degree unwise. A week elapsed before he saw her again. The interval was passed in a rapid interchange of anxious letters, fixing upon trains and packets, and then unsettling plans again. Mrs. Orr tells us that these few days were among the most harassed and depressed in the whole of Browning's life. But at last everything was settled; and during the afternoon of Saturday,

September 19, while the family were at the dinner table, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her maid, the luggage having been safely sent before, stole secretly from the house in Wimpole Street, and drove to Nine Elms Station. Nor must one forget that there was a third companion in the cab. The faithful Flush, her dog, who had been but a fortnight before recovered from thieves, was not one to be neglected in even the most perilous of retreats. There was danger indeed that he might arouse the house by barking at the prospect of the open air ; but, with a dog's intelligence, he grasped the situation, and trotted along without a sound. In the gallery of true friends Flush will never be forgotten.

Therefore to this dog will I
Tenderly, not scornfully,
Render praise and favour :
With my hand upon his head
Is my benediction said
Therefore, and forever.

The journey was safely undertaken. The Brownings left Southampton by boat that evening, and were at Paris next morning. The new life was begun, and from that day no further letters passed between the untiring correspondents. For they were never again apart.

VII.

So romantic an elopement could not fail to be the topic of much discussion. Secrecy had been wonderfully preserved. Even the most intimate friends were surprised. John Kenyon, whatever he may have suspected, knew nothing definitely till the event was past; and Forster, who since the evening we first saw him at Elstree had become a close confidant, derived his information from a slip of proof in the *Examiner* office. When he read in the type of his own paper that his friend Browning was actually married, he sent in hot haste for the compositor, and demanded the manuscript. It was in the handwriting of Browning's sister; and, on reading it, Forster was for the first time persuaded that the whole affair was, after all, not a hoax. Meanwhile the household at Wimpole Street was thrown into a fine confusion.

Mr. Barrett's indignation was illimitable. He had been defied and outwitted. Henceforth, in the words of that other disappointed father, he had "no such daughter." He never consented either to write to Mrs. Browning or to see her again.

The event, of course, made no little stir in what are called "literary circles." Every one was talking that autumn of "the marriage of Miss Barrett." She, it is worth remarking, was the undisputed protagonist; for at this time there was no comparison between the literary reputations of the two Brownings. The two-volume edition of her *Poems* had made her the cynosure of the critics' eyes, while her husband had been slowly receding from their gaze ever since the appearance of *Sordello*. Strange as it seems now, it is nevertheless clear that even his best friends were at this time a little doubtful of his promise. Neither *Pauline* nor *Paracelsus* had enjoyed a

large audience, but they had been read in the right quarters. Following on them, *Sordello* disappointed expectation ; and not even the Bells and Pomegranates, the last of which was printed in the year of his marriage, had restored the confidence of Browning's friends. In the year when he and Elizabeth Barrett joined hands, she was perhaps at the height of her reputation, while his stood at its lowest ebb.

In the meantime, while London was talking, the Brownings had reached Paris. The journey was not without its anxieties : the violent traffic of boat and railway wrought havoc with his wife's nerves. They found it necessary to move slowly south from Paris to Genoa, from Genoa to Pisa. At every turn of the way the bride was cared for by her husband with the most unfailing consideration. "Temper, spirits, manners," — she wrote to her friend, Miss Mitford, — "there is not a flaw anywhere. I

shut my eyes sometimes, and fancy it all a dream of my guardian angel." But, fortunately, as they approached warmer climes, her health improved steadily; and, by the time they had reached Pisa, she was feeling stronger than she had done for years. "Not improved, but transformed," she reported herself, and full of the beauty of the mild, restful country and the purple mountains, "gloriously beckoning the traveller into the vine land." Here, at Pisa, they settled for the winter, near the Duomo, with the Leaning Tower in close prospect from their windows. They had many books with them, and would discuss of an evening the methods of Balzac and Dumas, of Stendhal and George Sand. During the day they worked, each in a separate room; and it was at this time that Mrs. Browning's finest series of poems was brought to a finish.

Literary history owes to Mr. Edmund Gosse the picturesque story of the gen-

esis of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. It was Robert Browning's custom, he tells us, to work in a downstairs room, where their meals were spread; while his wife studied in a room on the floor above. One morning, within a few months of their settlement at Pisa, Browning stood at the window of his room, watching the street while the breakfast table was being cleared for his work. Suddenly his wife stole behind him, and, seizing his shoulder to prevent him from turning, slipped a packet of papers into his coat. He was to read it, she said, and tear it up if he did not like it. When he turned again, she was gone, too shy to await his verdict. The parcel, when opened, was found to contain the noble series of sonnets which is now generally acknowledged to be the flower of Mrs. Browning's poetry. As he read them one by one, the husband was conscious that here were "the finest sonnets written in any language since

Shakespeare.” He hastened to his wife’s work-room, to assure her face to face of his unbounded admiration. He urged her to print them, but she demurred. They were too intimate, she felt, for print; for they contained the sacred secrets of her betrothal. At last she consented to a private publication; and the package was sent home to Miss Mitford, with the request that she would see it through the press. The sonnets were printed that same year in a small octavo of 47 pages. Then, however, the little pamphlet was entitled simply *Sonnets by E. B. B.* It was not till they were included in her collected poems three years later that the question of a more distinctive title arose. She was for calling them *Sonnets from the Bosnian*, with an implication that they were translated; but Browning, whose pet name for his wife was “my little Portuguese,” cried: “Bosnian, no! that means nothing. From the Portuguese:

they are Catarina's sonnets!" The name was kept, and is now among the classics of literature.

Such is Mr. Gosse's story, told with all his grace and sympathy; and a pretty picture it makes of the Brownings' mutual understanding and fellowship. There is much more to linger over, were there space to be minute. That interesting year—1847, the year of *The Princess* and *Jane Eyre*, *Tancred* and *Wuthering Heights*—was passed by the secluded poets in Italy in pleasant, easy travelling. In the spring they left Pisa for Florence, where during the summer they changed lodgings from time to time, as the heat and more than one failure of health drew them to seek variety. They penetrated to leafy Val-lombrosa, making friends with the abbot there, and spent long moonlit evenings on their balcony terrace, with the lightest meals of iced water and melon. In the spring that followed a somewhat

ailing winter they moved at last into what proved something like an abiding home, the Guidi Palace, long since familiar to the untravelled from the remarkable poem which bears its name. There were six spacious rooms in their tenement, facing the grey walls of the church of San Felice. The long drawing-room, which looked out upon it, was Mrs. Browning's favourite room. It opened upon a balcony full of flowers. Its walls were hung with tapestry; and they collected in it quaint bookcases of Florentine workmanship, and grave, sweet pictures of saints and martyrs. The furnishing of the rooms was an absorbing interest, and everything was chosen with the view of harmony. It was here that *Casa Guidi Windows* was finished, and *Aurora Leigh* begun.

At Casa Guidi, too, on March 9, 1849, a son was born to them. The strain of anxiety which Browning naturally underwent, while a delicate wife was pass-

ing through a dangerous crisis, was rendered more poignant by the death of his mother, which followed immediately upon the birth of his son. Browning had always loved his mother with a passionate devotion, and for months he was unable to rally from the intolerable depression into which her loss plunged him. He was unable to eat or sleep, and his wife was clear in her conviction that a change was absolutely needful. They travelled to Spezzia and the Baths of Lucca, Mrs. Browning gaining strength with every new delight of scenery and association. The mountain air and the Italian sunshine were the breath of her life; and, as he watched her expanding in intellectual and physical beauty under his gaze, her husband cast off his melancholy, and for the first time for two or three years began to resume his literary work. His poems were reissued in two volumes in the year of his son's birth, and during the follow-

ing year he wrote *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*.

In the summer of the year following that of Tennyson's marriage and laureateship, the Brownings revisited England. They had left many friends there, whose company they had often sighed for in Florence; and it is not unlikely that Mrs. Browning had some hope that, if her father heard of her presence in England, he might consent to see her and be reconciled. In this, however, she was disappointed. During the ten years that intervened between her marriage and his own death, her father remained obdurate. The season in London, however, brought them many pleasures and the resumption of many old friendships. Their rooms in Devonshire Street were full of friends; and among the first whom Browning introduced to his wife was his old patron, Fox. It was autumn before they could tear themselves away. Then they re-

turned as far as Paris, where they spent the winter. It would be tedious to follow at great length the tale of their daily meetings with distinguished people. A few incidents, however, stand out conspicuously. It was here, in Paris, this autumn that Mrs. Browning first met the Tennysons, who had lost their first child that Easter, and were travelling for distraction upon that southern journey recorded in "The Daisy." The friendship which already subsisted between the husbands was re-echoed by the wives. "Mrs. Browning," said her new friend, "met me as though she had been my own sister." A few months later, when Hallam (the present Lord Tennyson) was born, the Brownings were among the first to receive the happy news; and Mrs. Browning's sympathetic congratulations were the very first to reach the home at Twickenham. Here, too, at Paris the Brownings saw George Sand, "a noble woman under

the mud," who had always been a subject of peculiar interest to them, and for whom — though they were disappointed in her lack of frankness — they retained a sincere, if rather compassionate admiration. Victor Hugo was another acquaintance of this period; and Béranger, if not met face to face, was a near and observed neighbour.

It was during this winter at Paris, so full of varied memories, that Browning wrote what was his only important piece of prose criticism. Moxon, the publisher, had acquired what he believed to be a bundle of hitherto unprinted letters from Shelley, and wrote to Browning, who had lately transferred his poems to Moxon's care, asking him to write an introduction. Browning, as we know, had always been an admirer of Shelley; and his recent visit to Spezzia may naturally have whetted his enthusiasm. He agreed to undertake the work, and the letters were sent him.

As is now proved, they were, with one possible exception, entirely spurious, but so cleverly imitated that Browning does not seem to have penetrated the forgery. He saw, however, that they had very little intrinsic interest; and his introduction, instead of dealing with the letters themselves, took the form of a general eulogy of Shelley's genius and, in some respects, a vindication of his life from calumny and misunderstanding. The essay, which is extremely interesting, both for its own criticism and also as a reflection of Browning's attitude, has been reprinted by the Browning Society. The original publication was withdrawn, when the spurious character of the letters was discovered.

With the spring the Brownings returned to Casa Guidi; and, though they were back again in England in the summer, it is at Florence that interest chiefly centres for the next two years. For, broken as their time was by anxie-

ties over their child's health and by occasional incursions into what seemed healthier quarters, it was at Casa Guidi that they did all the more important part of their work. While there, they lived a secluded and laborious life. The society of their child was almost their only distraction. When the pressure of work began to tell upon them, they moved elsewhere,—to Paris or London,—reserving Florence as the home of their poetry. For Browning was now engaged upon *In a Balcony* and the illustrious gallery of *Men and Women*, while his wife was writing *Aurora Leigh*. She had had the idea of a novel in verse before her for years. In one of her earliest letters to her husband she told him of it, and he cordially approved. But it grew slowly,—for *her*, very slowly,—being, indeed, ten years in the making.

Once only was their seclusion broken by strenuous interests from without,

when Miss Faucit (by this time Mrs. Theodore Martin) proposed to bring out *Colombe's Birthday* on the stage. Mrs. Browning was feverishly interested in the scheme ; but, if further evidence were needed of the disinclination for the stage which the trouble with Macready had brought to Browning, it would be afforded by the indifference with which he regarded the present production. He was grateful for the friendly feeling, but he would take no active part in the preparation. Beyond referring the actress to the latest edition of the play and begging her to use that text as it stood, he troubled not at all about the matter. The piece had a success with the critics ; but it was again badly acted, Miss Faucit alone, and for the third time, doing justice to the poet's intention.

For the rest, there was the life of the mountains, with much riding along precipitous paths and tarryings at little country inns to feast on strawberries and

milk. They seem to have found in their work, and in the splendid communion of nature, everything they needed for refreshment and consolation. It is a fine testimony to Browning's confidence and artistic magnanimity that, during these years of hard work, he never seems to have felt depression from any sense of lack of public appreciation. It was enough for him to be doing work that was gradually growing more into accordance with his own and his wife's ideal. He was confident, but never over-confident. In all probability it never occurred to him that the poetry which was springing up among those vineyards and olive groves of Florence was to be among the most precious of all the treasures of English literature. Certainly, he never would have allowed that the Men and Women among whom he was living were more vital creatures than his wife's Aurora Leigh, Romney, and Marian Erle. "She has genius," he said: "I

am only a painstaking fellow. Can't you imagine a clever sort of angel who plots and plans and tries to build up something? He wants to make you see it as he sees it, shows you one point of view, carries you off to another, hammering into your head the things that he wants you to understand; and, whilst all this bother is going on, God Almighty turns you off a little star. That's the difference between us."

There is no artist but would wish for just such modesty for himself. Yet this man wrote "Abt Vogler" and the "Guardian Angel."

VIII.

THE summer of 1855, when next the Brownings were in London, was one of uncommon literary agitation. It is, indeed, not unlikely that the sense of movement at the centre of things induced them to break in upon their Florentine seclusion ; for they were both engrossed in work at the time, and the change must have incurred interruptions. But it was a great year in literary London. Seldom have so many masterpieces burst upon a single season. Dickens had finished *Little Dorrit* ; Kingsley, *Westward Ho!* Macaulay had put forth two new volumes, the third and fourth, of his monumental History of England ; a new series of *Poems* had borne the name of Matthew Arnold ; Thackeray published the last part of *The Newcomes* in August. Leigh Hunt, George MacDonald, and Anthony Trollope were all represented by less im-

portant volumes ; and people were talking vaguely of a new genius, revealed in a rich and imaginative romance called the *Shaving of Shagpat*. Above all other books, *Maud* was the poem of the year. When the Brownings reached London, the critical bombardment of Tennyson had begun ; and all the various passions of mankind were being exercised in his condemnation and defence. Such an atmosphere was acutely stimulating to literary production, and there is no doubt that both poets felt the movement. They saw their friends freely, but callers were apt to notice that Mrs. Browning slipped a scrap of paper beneath her pillow as they were ushered into the room. She was, indeed, finishing *Aurora Leigh* at high-speed, writing, as the inspiration seized her, upon backs of envelopes, advertisements, or any blank sheet that was ready to her hand. Browning himself was correcting the proofs of *Men and Women* ; and, on the

evening when Tennyson read *Maud* to a select company in the Brownings' rooms in Dorset Street, the ink was scarcely dry upon the beautiful dedication, "One Word More." By the time the Brownings were back again in Rome the two volumes of *Men and Women* were in the reviewers' hands.

With this publication we enter upon a new period of Browning's life. Now, for the first time since his earlier volumes had surprised a little clan into admiration, he began to take a definite place in the estimates of criticism. There is no doubt that great expectations had been founded upon these volumes, and that the loving hopes of the wife prophesied a high success for them. It is equally certain that these expectations were far from being fulfilled. "You should see Chapman's returns," she wrote. And the gloomy figures of the publishers' balance sheet proved too clearly that the poet had not yet touched

the big reading public with whom Tennyson was now established. But *Men and Women*, containing, one need scarcely say, much of his finest and most concentrated work, had more than restored the shattered confidence of his friends. It had introduced him also to another generation of students of poetry, who were too young to remember the appearance of *Pauline*, and had found but few mentors to point out its promise. From this time, although the common interest in Browning was still languid and puzzled, the literary interest in him continued firm and increasing. In America he was at once recognised far more cordially than in England. There were "Browning evenings" in Boston; and it could not but hurt his wife's sensibility that "a small knot of pre-Raphaelite men" should form the main body of Browning's public in his own country, while in America an acquaintance with his work was held as a necessary badge

of culture. Nevertheless, he was no longer "neglected" in the most galling sense of that much-abused phrase. In the small circle where the highest poetry is appreciated he had his place of honour.

This winter of partial disappointment was spent in Paris, with much visiting and entertainment; and during its gay months Mrs. Browning worked unceasingly upon *Aurora Leigh*. By the summer it was finished, the last touch being added, as the dedication shows, upon the 17th of October, 1856, when from John Kenyon's own house in London she ascribed the poem to her cousin and friend who through "her various efforts in literature and steps in life had believed in her, borne with her, and been generous to her far beyond the common uses of mere relationship and sympathy." This touching dedication is the closing act in a friendship of unfailing devotion. Within two months of its inscription the

kind and manly heart of Kenyon had ceased to beat. He was not privileged to witness the full success of the book,—a success which would have been intensely gratifying to him. But his last thoughts were for his friends; and by his will the Brownings, husband and wife, were generously and helpfully benefited. Their sorrow for his loss was overwhelming. For a time it blotted out all other interests. At length, however, they returned to Florence and to work.

The success of *Aurora Leigh* was immediate. It will never rank with the best of its author's work. It is very unequal in style. There are arid wastes of narrative, and sentiment is sometimes drowned in sentimentality. But its very faults endeared it to the general reader, and probably no single poem has been so frequently bestowed as a gift-book. At one time it shared with Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* the

honours of literary pre-eminence in every list of wedding presents. As Mrs. Browning justly said, she had no cause to complain of the public attitude towards herself, for hers were the privileges of a favourite.

Meanwhile their child was growing up, and in his society they found consolation for the loss of older friends. He was a perpetual companion to them, sharing their mountain expeditions, and adding with pleasant prattle to the diversions of the way. They took up again their dreamy life, and the thunder of London sounded far away. Occasionally a friend broke in upon them with news from the book world. Occasionally again they were able of their own initiative to cement old friendships and associations. Among such incidents was their pleasant and kindly intercourse with Walter Savage Landor. The old man was at Fiesole, very unhappy, and time after time escaped to the Brown-

ings with an eloquent tale of loneliness. Browning, feeling that it was an urgent situation, wrote to Landor's brother, and arranged for his support, so that the aged poet was settled in a cottage close to Casa Guidi, and cared for by the very maid who had been Mrs. Browning's companion in her elopement, and her faithful attendant ever since. The arrangement had its clouds, for Landor was not always suave. There were moments when suspicion and a hot temper made the situation narrow enough. But Browning understood the old man's innate gentleness, and was wonderfully adroit in smoothing over difficulties. Landor lived in the little Florentine cottage very comfortably for the five remaining years of his life.

Meanwhile Mrs. Browning had been seriously ailing, and her husband's anxiety had been intolerable. It would seem that the air of Florence was beginning to undermine the health of both

of them. Neither was well, and *her* condition gave cause for the gravest apprehension. They moved her to Rome, however ; and she rallied slowly, dating from there the fulminating *Poems before Congress* which showed how closely she had taken the interests of her adopted country to heart, no less than how generously illogical a true woman may at times become. The anxieties of the hour increased ; and it is small wonder that Browning found it impossible to write. Active manual work became essential to distraction, and he busied himself with modelling from the antique. As soon as he had finished a bust or torso, he broke it, and began upon another. His restlessness was acute. The winter, however, passed without disaster ; and they returned to Siena for the spring. Then a fresh anxiety broke in upon them. Mrs. Browning's sister Henrietta (Mrs. Surtees Cook) became dangerously ill ; and during the next winter,

again spent at Rome, she died. The shock prostrated Mrs. Browning, and she never really recovered. They took her back to Casa Guidi; and there, in the home of her happiest memories, she sank gradually, but peacefully. At the last it was her love and sorrow for Italy which dealt her death-blow. The news of Cavour's death plunged her into a melancholy from which she was unable to rouse herself. "If tears or blood could have saved him, he should have had mine," she wrote. Three weeks later, on the 29th of June, 1861, the tender, chivalrous, and eager spirit of Elizabeth Barrett Browning was at rest forever.

Words like "love" and "womanliness," so often abused in the currency of speech and print, begin in time to lose their lustre. "The eternal God-word, Love," is forced into so many sullied uses that men are obliged to decorate it

with epithets, when they wish to give it a more than common implication of purity and strength. But for the poet of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* two words only suffice: "love" and "womanliness" were of the essence of her fine and quintessential spirit. Love, in itself rebellious of restraint, overwhelming, tempestuous, will not always go hand in hand with reason: the feminine nature is often too self-sufficing to seek for arguments. But with women, and above all with women who love, there is a wonderful, prompting instinct, which leads them more directly towards truth than all the weighed and proportioned logic of men; and the causes to which Elizabeth Barrett Browning lent her bright enthusiasm were rarely causes undeserving of her love. Her poetry suffered from her passion. She felt so strongly, that she could not always pause to choose expressions for her feeling; and much that she wrote in a white heat of elo-

quence is unlikely to bear the cooling, sifting influence of time. As a poet, she stands a step below the highest. She saw, indeed, into the holy of holies,—saw, in her own words,

The cherub faces which emboss
The Vail, lean inward to the Mercy-seat;

but it was not hers to minister at the altar. Yet even here, and so far, “Blessed are they which have seen.”

But what was denied her in art was given back to her an hundred-fold in life. The story of her devotion to her love is the story, as a critic has well said, of the “stainless harmony” of two of the finest spirits that were ever trammelled with the cares of humanity. The grand ideal of marriage, so often blurred behind a mist of hindering emotions, gleams out in their life, like the noonday sun in its strength. The marriage of true minds admits no impediment.

IX.

WHEN the first acute bitterness of his loss was over, and he was able to think of the future, Browning decided that Florence was no longer possible as a home. Its memories were too poignant, and he had his little son to consider. An English education seemed desirable, no less than woman's companionship; and it was settled that the Brownings should move to London, where Miss Arabel Barrett, his wife's favourite sister, was engaged in a sort of mission work among the destitute children of Paddington. Browning had always been fond of her. She was a gentle creature, in whose presence, as Mrs. Browning once said, no one ever mentioned the possibility of one man *hating* another; for she was all love and self-sacrifice. His own sister was engaged in taking care of her aged father in Paris; and so

he naturally turned to the other aunt, and to London. As soon as the necessary preparations were completed, they left Florence, the melancholy interval having found some consolation in the devoted kindness of another friend, Miss Isa Blagden, who took little "Pen" from the house of mourning, and did all she could to spare both him and his father the more sordid cares inseparable from such an occasion. Two summer months were passed near Dinard, and in the early autumn Robert Browning and his son arrived in town. After a few months of unsettled lodging, Browning took a house in Warwick Crescent, over against the canal, and within a stone's throw of Miss Barrett's home in Delamere Terrace. This was his London home for more than twenty-five years.

Of the many actions in his life which go to prove Browning's strength of mind and character, there is nothing so im-

pressive as this stern, lonely resumption of work and duty. For many years to come his life was to creep on broken wing; and, indeed, so far as the finer issues of the spirit go, he always felt that his life was already behind him. Still, with indomitable energy, he pursued the path he had set before himself. The education of his son he regarded as a sacred legacy from his wife, the completion of his own work in poetry as the only offering he could make to her memory. Like the speaker of his own "Evelyn Hope," he looked out upon the future with the determination to win all that was essential from the present.

I have lived (I shall say) so much since then,
Given up myself so many times,
Gained me the gains of various men,
Ransacked the ages, spoiled the climes.

It was part of the religion of his love that no talent which could be devoted to its service should be buried in a napkin.

At first the depression of a change from a Florentine summer to a damp, foggy London winter was almost overwhelming. "How I yearn, yearn for Italy!" he wrote. But his natural courage carried him through; and he soon took up the new life, not only with resignation, but with something like zest. He had work in hand to finish, and he was engaged also in preparing for publication a posthumous volume of his wife's *Last Poems*. So the winter passed, and the next summer, which, in accordance with what now became a general custom with him, was spent abroad at Biarritz. Henceforth it becomes unnecessary to review his simple, recurrent life month by month. The winters were spent in London and the summers on the Continent; and winter and summer alike he divided his time between the company of his friends and the consolations of his poetry.

In 1864 he published *Dramatis Per-*

sonæ, after a silence of nine years. Probably Browning, absorbed in his own art, had scarcely noticed any change in the general attitude to poetry ; but it so happened that during those nine years there had been a considerable development of poetic taste among the younger generation. Especially at the universities poetry had begun to be read more intelligently, and to be written, less in the old formal fashion of Pope qualified by Crabbe, and with a nearer approach to spontaneity and freedom from academic affectation. The influence of Ruskin, which had been slowly growing at Oxford for twenty years, had changed the whole attitude of the younger generation towards literature and art. A fresher spirit was astir, and among the young men at Oxford who had shown promise in this sort of renaissance were Philip Stanhope Worsley, for example, and John Addington Symonds ; while, in the very year of

Dramatis Personæ, Professor Courthope, then an undergraduate, had won the Newdigate with an uncommonly natural and delicate poem upon Shakespeare's Tercentenary. At the same time Mr. Andrew Lang was a Freshman, and Professor Saintsbury in his last year. These are apparently trivial indications; but a straw shows the way of the wind, and one of the first things that Browning's publishers had to report was that his new book was proving unexpectedly popular both at Oxford and Cambridge.

All my new cultivators [wrote Browning] are young men,—more than that, I observe that some of my old friends don't like at all the irruption of outsiders who rescue me from their sober and private approval, and take the words out of their mouths, which they always meant to say, and never did.

The universities are not, of course, the hub of the universe; but they are a great recruiting ground for literary reputation. The young men who in 1864 were reading and praising *Atalanta in Calydon*,

and "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and "Abt Vogler," had three or four years later developed into the critics who gave such a thunderous welcome to *Poems and Ballads* and *The Ring and the Book*. The steady increase of readers for *Dramatis Personæ* was a sign of the times. Browning was no longer in advance of his generation: his hour was on the point of striking. And, in the stimulating fitness of things, he was at that moment engaged upon his greatest work.

The story of that poem and its genesis is told, once and for all, with Browning's inimitable richness, in the overture to *The Ring and the Book* itself. One June day, among his last at Casa Guidi, he was strolling along the Piazza San Lorenzo, when a little book caught his eye upon a market-stall. It was an old, square, yellow volume, with crumpled vellum covers; and, seeing that it was marked at eightpence, and dealt with a

famous murder case, promising interest, he bought it on the spot, and started to read it then and there, among the piles of merchandise and the hubbub of mid-day traffic. He tells how he walked on, absorbed in the matter, reading,—

Through street and street,
At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge;
Till, by the time I stood at home again
In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,
Under the doorway where the black begins
With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole
truth.

The psychology of crime had always a peculiar attraction for Browning. Mr. Kegan Paul, in his pleasant volume of *Memories*, tells of a dinner party at which he and Browning were present, when the conversation turned upon famous murder cases; and the company were surprised to find that the poet possessed an elaborate knowledge of the details of evidence and motive in almost every important trial of the kind. The

Franceschini case was, therefore, just the sort of thing to appeal to him ; and, though he seems to have offered the theme to other writers, it was always working in his brain, and within a year of his settling in London had taken some shape as a poem in his lively imagination. He tells us himself that he was four years at work upon the actual manuscript ; but, before that, the whole development of the case, in its every aspect, had been churned over and over again in his mind and subjected to searching analysis. It is said that he read over the evidence eight times before he set out upon his own tenfold presentation of it. The result, as every one knows, is the wonderful poem of twenty thousand lines, against which so much criticism and eulogy have beaten eager wings.

The Ring and the Book might well be discussed in a volume of criticism as bulky as itself, and yet the question of

its artistic justification would remain unsettled. That it is "tyrannously long without action, mercilessly voluble," as Professor Saintsbury pronounces it, and at times irritatingly reiterative, every one but the fanatic must reluctantly admit. But that it contains passages of supreme poetry, and that its entire scheme is founded upon the most delicate and subtle fabric of imaginative analysis, no one but a dullard will attempt to deny. Brevity was never one of Browning's virtues; and, in discussing any of his poems, the trick of prolixity must be discounted at the outset. In *The Ring and the Book* he deliberately seeks it: it is of the very essence of the idea that every hair should be split. One may quarrel with the method; but it is absurd to suppose that the author was ignorant of his own devices! The search for truth — truth of motive, the mainspring of action — became more and more the absorbing interest of his poetry;

and in that search he adopted the habit of sifting every false aspect of the question, until there was left, like a precipitate, the simple grain of truth in the whole solution. This is the method of *The Ring and the Book*, applied, one need scarcely say, with an elaborate fidelity, of which Browning alone among the English poets of three hundred years was capable. In its course he re-creates characters only to dissolve them into their component emotions, suggests motives only to probe their sincerity, and reveals himself more than anywhere else in his work the inspired master of human thought and action.

With *The Ring and the Book* we reach the culminating point of Browning's poetic development. As we have seen, it is always with the individual soul that his philosophy is occupied. The salvation, the possibilities, of individual development, here and hereafter, are always his concern. But, while at first he

turned to his own emotions for analysis, and imputed himself to his characters, he next, in the natural course of development, sought for subjects outside his own range of experience, and, as in "Bishop Blougram" or "Mr. Sludge," became definitely dramatic in method. Then, as the search for truth becomes more searching, he goes outside the individual, to arrive at the individual motive, and, as in *The Ring and the Book*, brings an array of characters, with an infinity of different side-lights and broken truths, to bear upon the one, isolated, individual act, and by the mixture of a vast alloy of falsehood completes, as it were, the golden ring of truth. The method may be casuistical: "falsehood," as Professor Dowden remarks, "seems almost more needful to the poet than truth"; but the wonderful verisimilitude of detail is justified by the clear and gleaming light in which the truth is eventually revealed.

After *The Ring and the Book* Browning continued to employ the same method with something of the same wonderful result ; but it was already perfected, and he naturally never developed it further. Indeed, it is doubtful whether he ever again exhibited the same exquisite delicacy of treatment, or wrote with the same magnificence of diction, the same singular bursts of harmony. An analytic method such as this has its own perils. It is only a consummate genius that can bend it to true poetic uses. As Browning declined in years, the subtlety was apt to be obscured by suppression and unconscious crudity, the music to be abused by eccentricities of rhyme, which offend the ear and lend nothing to the effect. *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* and *Pacchiarotto* will always survive as literary curiosities ; but it is doubtful whether they will long be read, either with pleasure or profit. The Browning of 1889 was substantially

the Browning of 1868, with his manner solidified and his habit frozen. As a man ages, his characteristics either fade into nullity or assume emphatic angles. With a strong temperament the second alternative is almost inevitable, and it was so with Browning. Like Tennyson, he remained productive to the last ; but in neither case had the fresh fruit other than a reminiscent flavour of the old. Browning's creative course will always be marked in an ascending grade until the rich year of *The Ring and the Book*. With that year he took rank among the acknowledged great ; and for the rest of his life it was his pleasant privilege to reap the harvest of his labours, in the broad fields of universal recognition and close and intimate friendship.

X.

THERE were twenty years of active life left to Browning after *The Ring and the Book*; and during those twenty years he published fourteen volumes of poetry. They were, indeed, in many senses, the fullest years of his life. He was conscious, at last, of popularity and a public. He was a welcome and entertained guest in the houses of a hundred friends. His pen was ceaselessly employed in "giving the people of his best." And yet to the biographer these years afford but little colour. More that is of vital import may be concentrated in one twenty minutes of a man's life than in another twenty years; and in the even tenour of a ripe and successful career there is less that appeals to the heart than in the broken record of early struggles and disappointments. The years that saw the publication of *Balaus-*

tion's Adventure and *Fifine at the Fair*, of *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, *Jocoseria*, *Ferishtah*, and the rest, are chiefly interesting to a brief biography for their record of the friendships with which Browning's life was now so richly endowed. For it was now for the first time that he became a familiar figure in London society. Literary friendships he had always enjoyed, but even these, owing to his absence from England, chiefly in the form of correspondence. With his settlement in London he added daily to the circle of his acquaintances, and many different pictures of him are to be found in many books. They reveal a temperament at once strong and lovable. To his friends Browning was indeed a very real friend, giving himself freely and without the slightest affectation or self-consciousness. It was always said of him that no man was freer from the "pose of the poet." He had no literary tricks of tone or gesture. Those

who had come out of the wilderness in the hope of seeing a poet were apt to be disappointed. They thought to find a prophet, enveloped in a mantle of mystery, and, lo! a kindly, white-bearded gentleman, who spoke with knowledge of horsemanship and the opera. But those who were quicker in perception saw that his natural, unassuming talk was really the fruit of abundant, encyclopædic information, out of which Browning could equally discuss tides and shoals with a sailor, or shares and bubbles with a city magnate. He preferred, indeed, to talk to a man of the things the man himself could understand. Nor was it any part of his energy to play mentor or guide to an open-mouthed bevy of school-girls. With Tennyson, Palgrave, and Gladstone he would discuss Shakespeare and Latin verses; but he knew all about the price of Pornic butter for the thrifty housewife. And in all such changes

of standpoint he was never patronizing nor petty. Whatever the topic, he discussed it with an intellectual vigour ; and the simplest girl felt at her ease with him instinctively.

His dearest friends were always women, and at every pressing crisis in his life a woman was his confidante. At one time it was Miss Haworth, at another Miss Mitford, and, in his darkest hour of all, Miss Isa Blagden ; while he found in his own wife a friend whose sympathy rendered all other confidences needless for the space of fifteen years of absolute communion. The strongest and most masculine character will always be found to seek those complementary qualities of womanhood, for which a weekly or effeminate nature can find substitutes in itself. The most completely "manly" men have always understood women best. This was precisely so with Browning. His letters to his women friends are full of sympathy, tact, and insight,—quali-

ties in the absence of which anything like sincerity of intercourse is impossible between the sexes. He never made the mistake of writing or talking "down" to a woman. He had been privileged to share the aspirations of one woman of spiritual force, and knew well enough "the silent silver lights and darks undreamed of" which are revealed in most women's hearts for the man who can find the key to the gate.

With the death of his wife, he lost a kindly critic, to whom his work owed much, even beyond the primal inspiration of sympathy. Turbid and troubled as much of her own work was, Mrs. Browning was fully alive to the risks of obscurity and suppression in her husband's. Her criticism and advice made always for lucidity; and it will be apparent to any one who cares to examine carefully that the best and most vital of Browning's poetry was produced under her influence. In saying this, one does

not forget the date of *The Ring and the Book*, which was published seven years after her death, but is manifestly full of her memory. It was written with the afterglow of her influence full upon him, and breathes her inspiration in every part. But in his later works the tendency to difficulty of expression and crudity of music returned incorrigibly. It is somewhat of a paradox that the hardest of Browning's work was produced after people had ceased to complain of his obscurity. During the last fifteen years of his life he had become a vogue. A Browning Society, which he regarded with kindliness not altogether free from apprehension, had arisen to expound him ; and to fail to admire him was now considered to argue lack of culture. The swing of the pendulum is from pole to pole.

Among his friends were several to whom he looked for criticism. M. Mil-sand, the distinguished French critic,

who was the first to introduce his poetry to a Parisian audience, was perhaps the most trusted. He read the proofs of all Browning's later volumes, and made many helpful suggestions. Miss Anne Thackeray (Mrs. Richmond Ritchie) was often with Browning abroad, and, besides suggesting the title of *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, was a close confidante of his literary plans during many sunny afternoons at St. Aubin. For during these summer holidays Browning was continually at work, and much of his closest application was left to the hours when he should have been at rest.

In London his activity was remarkable. He rose early, and invariably found a pile of letters upon his table. Correspondence was never a pleasure to him, for he disliked the exercise of writing. But so punctilious was his courtesy that by the time he had finished answering his morning letters he was often too tired to take up his more

serious work. The same courtesy and consideration were shown in his welcome to visitors. He had none of that inaccessibility behind which great men have been wont to protect their freedom. Mrs. Ritchie relates the incident of one morning call, when she found every room in the house at Warwick Crescent occupied by different visitors awaiting audience, and Browning himself pale and exhausted from the effort of conversation with well-meaning enthusiasts. Of an afternoon he was an assiduous attendant at concerts. His friend Miss Egerton Smith used to call for him in her carriage; and for years, Mrs. Orr tells us, the two friends scarcely missed a single musical "event" of any importance. In the evening he was a constant diner-out; and yet during the greater part of his residence in London not a day passed without his adding something to his poetry, working slowly, it is true, but with infinite pains, pro-

ducing, perhaps, a single page of manuscript in a morning's work.

In his poetry and in the society of his friends he seems to have found considerable happiness. As all who met him agree, Browning was at heart an optimist. He had a comfortable gift of adapting himself to circumstances, of accepting gladly what life had to give him, of compromising with life, in short. In his own philosophy, as in his poetry, he was content to regard life as the exercise ground of faculties which should be more fully realised in some ultimate existence elsewhere. He was always consciously fostering his talents for their fuller, mysterious development. And so he appears to us, moving through the shadows of advancing age,—blithe, contented, self-contained, a man of infinite sympathy and unflagging energy.

Miss Arabel Barrett died in the year of *The Ring and the Book*, and the poet's father had then been dead two years.

After her father's death, Miss Browning came to live with her brother; and her kindliness and tact did much to brighten his home. More than all, his son's distinctions as an artist were a continual pride to him; and it may be truly said of Browning that the closing days of his life were not only illumined by honours from without, but also sustained and heartened from within by the unfailing affection of those who were dearest to him.

In 1887 his son married, and he himself moved from Warwick Crescent to De Vere Gardens. He took keen interest in the arrangement of his new home, but those who knew him best noticed that the old energy was no longer capable of such prolonged flights. During the next two years his vigour slowly abated, and he began to think of settling for the end of his life in a home that should remind him of its beginning. It had long been a cherished ambition with him to secure a house at Asolo, and

there was a half-finished building in the precincts of the castle there, which he particularly desired to complete and to name "Pippa's Tower." Negotiations were opened, and languished. Browning went to Venice in the November of 1889, and was daily expecting a settlement of the affair. The delay worried him, and towards the end of the month he caught a severe chill. Bronchitis set in, and he sank steadily. On Thursday, the 12th of December, at about ten o'clock at night, he died. His gentle optimism stood by him to the last. He continually assured the watchers by his bed that he was not suffering. He knew that he was dying, and he met the knowledge without fear.

I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!

I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and
forebore,
And bade me creep past.

.

For sudden the worst turns the best to the
 brave,
 The black minute's at end,
 And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that
 rave,
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,
 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of
 pain,
 Then a light, then thy breast,
 O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
 And with God be the rest!

He had felt—without caring very greatly, however—that he should like to lie by his wife's side; but the nation thought otherwise. On the last day of the year he was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, and rests there to-day, before the Chaucer monument, side by side with Alfred Tennyson. "In poetry illustrious and consummate, in friendship noble and sincere," the great twin-brethren of Victorian poetry are united once more in death.

XI.

IT is a commonplace of criticism that for the first fifty years of his life Browning was in advance of his age. But a platitude, often repeated, begins to lose its significance ; and perhaps we hardly realise precisely how it was that Browning's poetry was so long in finding recognition. It is said, and repeated with iteration, that he is obscure ; and, indeed, as he himself remarked, he did not profess to provide the kind of poetry which should serve as a substitute for a cigar or a game of cards. But obscurity is a permanent defect. It does not wear off with the friction of time ; and, if Browning's *Men and Women* were obscure in 1855, they would be equally obscure in 1900. We are now, however, generally agreed that very little of his poetry is so involved but that an ordinary intellect can unravel it by ordinary

exercise; and there must have been something beyond subtlety of thought to estrange the readers who were already beginning to honour Carlyle. What, then, was the quality in which Browning lay outside the habits of his own time,—the quality which kept him for more than thirty years at work before he began to have anything like a considerable following? It would seem to have been almost entirely a question of *method*, and not a question of thought or of “message” at all. Browning’s “message,” as we shall presently see, is essentially simple and direct. It is concerned entirely with wide and open problems of life. It may be made to move hand in hand with orthodox religion. It contains nothing to repel or even to astonish. It is a necessary part of any spiritual system whatever, of every conceivable school of philosophy which leads anywhere beyond the abyss of despair. But his *method* was another

matter. It was new and disturbing, intricate and curious ; and it was introduced into poetry at a time when literature, having just recovered from the fervours of the French Revolution, had settled down again into a natural calm, in the pursuit of beauty for its own sake. Now, although the pursuit of the spirit of beauty is implicit in all Browning's work, he had very little care for abstract principles apart from their direct relation to humanity. Mankind, and especially the individual man as the microcosm, was the entire concern of his poetry ; and, in order to arrive at the truth of all general principles as they affected man, it was the essence of his method to analyse the emotions of the individual, to dissect the impulse, and from the isolated example to proceed to the generalisation. The method required complexity, if it was to be in the least degree effectual ; and the complexity demanded concentrated attention in the reader who was to follow it.

The public taste for poetry in 1833 was far below the taste for prose. Byron's vogue had already waned; Keats and Shelley were silent in death. The field was given over to moonlight-verse melodists; to Moore and the metres of sugar and tinsel *keepsake* verse. The early Victorian reader expected poetry to entertain him, to appeal mildly to the sentiments of parted love and aspiring poverty. He had just emerged from the barrel-organ tenderness of Thomas Haynes Bayly, and was rising to the flights of Eliza Cook and the Hon. Mrs. Norton. He was puzzled, baffled, annoyed by Browning's brusque and vigorous lines. He resented his demand upon the brain, and decided at once that such poetry was unintelligible.

And yet what could be simpler than the direct theme of almost all Browning's poetry,—his "message," if we *must* use the word that, having been thumped into every pulpit-cushion of

Evangelicism, is now a little dusty and threadbare? Browning took the human soul as the unit of humanity; and he took it as he found it, let and hindered by the slough of its mortality. He found it bounded in a nutshell, but trembling with the fire of boundless ambition. It was too great, too strong for its surroundings: the world was not worthy of it; but the sphere of its activity was still the world itself. Clearly, so spiritual a fire was not destined to be quenched in death. The life which we know was, as he saw it, a preparation for some further, fuller existence, in which the faculties would be no longer depressed, but every unfulfilled impulse would burst into fruition. Life, then, must be concentrated upon the emotions: every enthusiasm must be given play; but the play of all must be subordinated by a sense of the impossibility of realising the true power of the faculties in this life. The present career can only

be one of failure : the man who thinks he has succeeded is indeed a castaway ; for he has lost his sense of the possibilities of his own soul. But in high failure lies the true success of well-directed effort. So in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" :—

Not on the vulgar mass
 Called "work," must sentence pass,
 Things done, that took the eye and had the
 price ;
 O'er which, from level stand,
 The low world laid its hand,
 Found straightway to its mind, could value in a
 trice :

But all the world's coarse thumb
 And finger failed to plumb,
 So passed in making up the main account ;
 All instincts immature,
 All purposes unsure,
 That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the
 man's amount :

Thoughts hardly to be packed
 Into a narrow act,
 Fancies that broke through language and es-
 caped ;
 All I could never be,
 All, men ignored in me,
 This I was worth to God, whose wheel the
 pitcher shaped.

So, too, of course, in that splendid pæan of exalted failure,—“A Grammarian’s Funeral” :—

That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it and does it:
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it.
That low man goes on adding one to one,
His hundred’s soon hit:
This high man, aiming at a million,
Misses an unit.

The same idea animates his poems upon the arts, which, since the artist’s aim is always ideal and inaccessible, are parables, so to speak, of the higher life. “Andrea del Sarto” is the picture of a painter who, being without fault in small technicalities, blameless to the smaller critic, is ruined in the higher and spiritual expression. He looks at a picture by the young Raphael, can see faults in its drawing, faults which he could remedy, but knows that the soul of the work is beyond him.

Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:
But all the play, the insight and the stretch—
Out of me, out of me!

So in "Abt Vogler" the musician hears the melody die away, and feels that in power of permanent expression he is far behind the builder, who rears some magnificent cathedral for all time. But to both the painter and the musician the same consolation returns, bringing a sense of future development,— "Other heights in other lives, God willing."

For Andrea,—

What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more
chance—

Four great walls in the new Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo, and me
To cover.

For the musician,—

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good
shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor
good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives
for the melodist,
When eternity affirms the conception of an
hour.

The high that proved too high, the heroic for
earth too hard,

The passion that left the ground to lose itself
in the sky,

Are music sent up to God by the lover and the
bard;

Enough that He heard it once: we shall hear
it by and by.

There, shorn of all external concomitants, is the simple, direct, eternal "message" of Browning's poetry. "He approaches the real world," says Professor Dowden,—putting the whole discussion into a sentence,— "and takes it as it is and for what it is, yet at the same time penetrates it with sudden spiritual fire." The doctrine is as old as Plato, and has reappeared in a score of different forms; it is inseparable from the teaching of the Hebrew prophets; it has thrown its roots into the fabric of Christianity. There is nothing in it obscure, difficult, or remote. It is the elementary doctrine of the continuity of energy. But in Browning it assumes a hundred facets,

which take the light so differently that we get a perpetual sense of novelty and change. As each new character is displayed, with amazing subtlety of sympathy and insight, the eye is almost dazzled with the flashing of side-lights ; and the one, bright, "gem-like flame" at the heart of things is occasionally submerged. Penetrate the outward scintillations, however ; and it is always found to be burning steadily and clear. To realise himself in all his emotions and aspirations, to grow into form and beauty like the clay upon the potter's wheel,—that is the whole duty of man.

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
That metaphor! and feel
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,—
Thou, to whom fools propound,
When the wine makes its round,
"Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone,
seize to-day!"

Fool! all that is, at all,
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:

What entered into thee,

That was, is, and shall be:

Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay
endure.

It has been objected against Browning's claim to greatness that he did but little to reflect the aims and aspirations of his own countrymen, that he was very little moved by the stream of events, and that his historical value is affected by his lack of immediate value to his time. It is true, indeed, that Browning was at no time a "topical" poet; and much of his long unpopularity was, no doubt, due to his disinclination to come down into the market-place, with his singing robes about him, and make great ballads of the day to the chorus of the crowd. But there is a higher part even than that of a national poet; and Browning is, in a very real sense, the poet, not of England alone, but of the world. His attitude to men and life was never distraught by petty interests of blood or party: the

one claim upon him was the claim of humanity. He was a man, and nothing that pertained to man was foreign to himself. What will be his final place in the long array of English poetry it is still impossible to say. It took long for him to come into his own, and even then many outside developments helped him. We think ourselves to-day far wiser than our grandparents : we fancy, perhaps, that, if *Pauline* had come to one of us fresh from the press, we should have hailed it forthwith as a work of coming genius. All this may be, and yet the last word will always remain to be said. Time brings in, not only revenges, but redresses ; and it is probable that Robert Browning is not even yet appreciated as he will be by our children's children. But even now we know him for much that he is,—the subtlest, strongest master of human aspiration, save only Shakespeare, that has ever dignified the English language with

poetry ; a man who felt for men with all the intensity of a great, unselfish heart ; a genius crowned with one guerdon which genius cannot always boast,—a pure and noble life. Standing in the twilight shades of the whispering Abbey, in that sacred corner full of haunting melodies and immortal yearnings, we may gladly feel that, however long and weary was the neglect of him, he is now, at last, gathered to his peers.

Lofty designs must close in like effects:

Loftily lying,

Leave him,—still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying.

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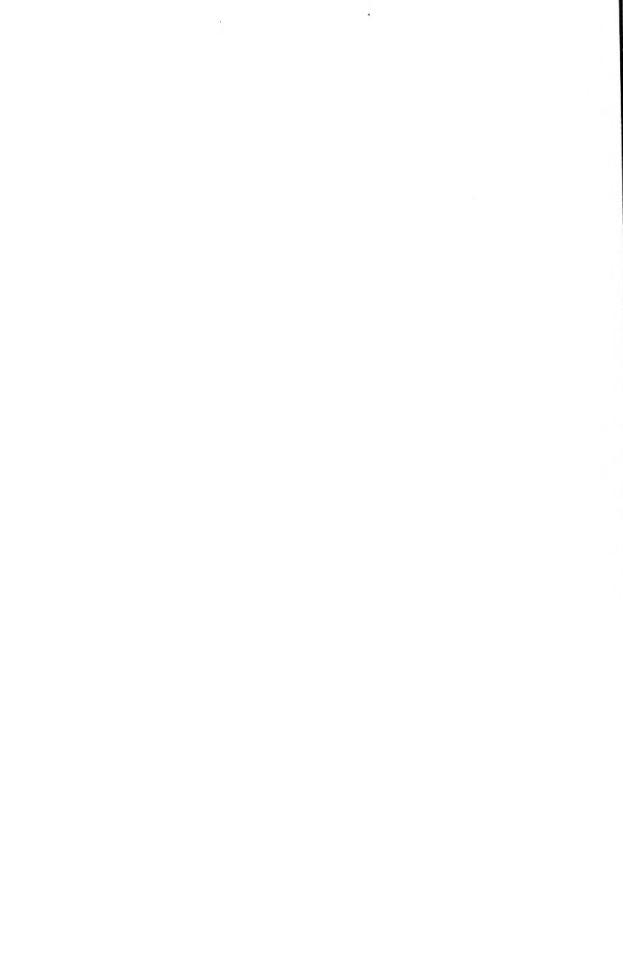
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